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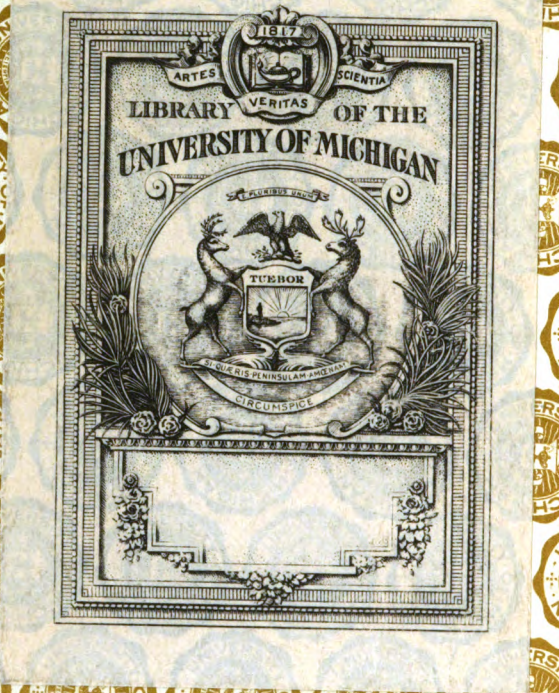
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STOLEN IDOLS

By

E. Phillips Oppenheim

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1925

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BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

THE two ships, pursuer and pursued, quaintly shaped, with heavy, flapping sails, lay apparently becalmed in a sort of natural basin formed by the junction of two silently flowing, turgid rivers — rivers whose water was thick and oily, yellow in colour, unpleasant to look at. The country through which they passed was swamp-riven and desolate, though in the far distance were rice fields and the curiously fashioned roofs of a Chinese village. The sun beat down upon the glasslike water. The air was windless. Further movement seemed impossible until from the smaller boat, through unexpectedly opened *hatches*, half a dozen oars were suddenly thrust into the water. The huge Chinaman who stood at the helm, yellow-skinned and naked to the waist, picked up an enormous pole and let it gradually down into the river bed. The oars, languidly though they were wielded, cut the water, and the dhow began slowly to move. Wu Abst, the Mighty Terror of the Great River, as he loved to hear himself described, grinned mockingly as he looked backwards towards his pursuer. He shouted words through the glistening heat intended to convey his contempt of those who fancied that he was to be caught napping. Then he bent over his giant pole and glanced with satisfaction at the distant bank, which already showed signs of their progress. At the bend of the river, not three miles distant, was a

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stretch of water into which no such craft as that which had chased him could follow. He relit his pipe, therefore, and smoked like a man at peace, whilst below the sweat rolled from the naked bodies of the men who were emulating their Roman predecessors of two thousand years ago. Wu Abst, pleased with their efforts, shipped his pole for a moment, and, leaning over the side, shouted encouragement and exhortation to the toilers. Then suddenly the words died away upon his lips. His whole frame stiffened. The remains of the grin faded from his face, the whole expression of which was now almost ludicrously changed. For across that little stretch of river came the horrible sound of which he had heard, the pop-pop-pop denoting the use of some devil-made mechanical contrivance, which triumphed over windless airs and opposing currents.

His horrified gaze became fastened upon the pursuing ship, now also moving, and not only moving, but moving very much faster than anything which all the efforts of his toiling gang were able to accomplish. Bewilderment gave place to anger, which in its turn became merged almost at once in the philosophy of his race — the graveyard of all emotions! He shouted an order to those down below. There was a clatter and a rumble as the men shipped their oars, and another more metallic sound as they exchanged them for other weapons.

Wu Abst thrust his hand through the window of a small cuddy hole, which he called his cabin, and drew out a long, antiquated rifle. It was one of a type manufactured in Birmingham fifty years ago, rejected since then by every South American band of patriots planning a revolution, and scoffed at even by West African savages. He nevertheless dropped a cartridge into its place and waited whilst the other ship glided almost alongside. His eyes swept its deck, and his bloodthirsty intentions

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were promptly changed. With expressionless face he slipped his weapon back again through the cuddy hole and called down another order below. Then he leaned over the rail and raised his hand in salute. A man who was seated aft in a basket chair upon the deck of the approaching ship, rose to his feet and came to the side. He wore Chinese garb and he spoke Chinese, but his linen clothes were spotlessly white and he wore no pigtail.

"Are you Wu Abst, the river pirate?" he called out.

"I am Wu Abst," was the reply. "And who are you?"

"I am Wu Ling, the peaceful trader," the other answered. "I bring prosperity to those whom you seek to rob."

Wu Abst spat into the river.

"I know of you," he growled. "You trade with foreign money. You take the jade and the gems, the silk and the handiwork of these people and sell them rubbish."

"Where I take," the other rejoined, "I give something in return, which is more than you do."

"What is your business with me?" Wu Abst demanded, glancing sullenly at the two Maxim guns trained upon him, behind each of which was seated, cross-legged, a brawny and capable-looking Chinese sailor.

"Last night," Wu Ling announced, "I traded at the village of Hyest, and I heard a strange tale. I heard that you had on board your ship a foreigner tied with ropes, and that you were waiting to reach your own stretches to throw him to the crocodiles. Is this the truth, Wu Abst, or am I to search your ship?"

"It is the truth," the other admitted grimly. "He is a foreign devil who merits death and even torture. He is a thief and a sacrilegious pest upon the earth."

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"You speak hard words of him," Wu Ling observed.

"What words other than hard can be spoken of such?" Wu Abst retorted. "Presently I shall tell you of his deeds. I like not your speech, Wu Ling. You speak our tongue but speak it strangely. There are rumours of you in many places. There are some who say that not only is the money with which you trade the money of foreign devils, but that you, too, are one of them in spirit if not by birth."

"What I am is none of the present business," Wu Ling declared. "What of this prisoner of yours?"

"I shall speak of him now," Wu Abst answered. "Then, if you are indeed a man of this country, you shall see that I do no evil thing in casting him to the crocodiles. He was caught, a thief in the sacred temple of the sacred village of Nilkaya, in the temple where the Great Emperor himself was used to worship. The priests who caught him tied his body with ropes — not I. They brought him to the riverside, and they gave me silver to deal with him."

"Your story is true," Wu Ling admitted. "The circumstances you relate are known to me. But there were two of these robbers. What of the other, his companion?"

"The priests say that he escaped, and with him the two sacred Images of the great God, reverenced for nine hundred years," the pirate confided. "It is because of the escape of the other that they wish to make sure of the death of this one."

Wu Ling considered for a moment.

"Wu Abst," he pronounced at last, "you have told me a true story, and you have acted in this matter as a just man. Therefore these guns of mine shall bring no message of evil to you, nor shall I declare war, so long as you keep to your side of the river and above the

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villages where I trade. But as for the foreign devil, you must hand him over to me."

Wu Abst raised his hands to heaven. For a time his speech was almost incomprehensible. He was stricken with a fit of anger. He shouted and pleaded until he foamed at the mouth. Wu Ling listened unmoved. When at last there was silence he spoke.

"It is clear to me what you intended, Wu Abst," he said. "There was to be torture and more silver from the priests before you cast this prisoner to the sea fish."

"It is a hard living that one makes nowadays," Wu Abst, the Terror of the River, muttered.

"Nevertheless in this matter I am firm," the other insisted. "Hand me over the foreigner and go your way. You know of me. I travel into dangerous places when I leave my ship, and I have a score of men below who could hew their way through a regiment of your cutthroats, and a gun in the bows there which would send you to the bottom with a single discharge. I am your master, Wu Abst, and I command. Bring me the foreigner and go your way."

So, a few minutes later, a half-naked, barely conscious, young Englishman, the remains of his garments rags upon his back, blue in the face from lack of circulation, a hideous and pitiful sight, was carried up from the hold of Wu Abst's sailing dhow and laid upon the deck of the trading schooner of Wu Ling. His cords were cut, brandy and water were poured down his throat, a sail reared as a shelter from the sun, whilst from a small hose, cool, refreshing water was sprayed over him until consciousness returned and speech began to stammer from his lips. Then, from the petrol engine, commenced once more the noise which had brought consternation to Wu Abst. The ship swung round in a circle and passed on its way down the river.

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Wu Abst, with a little shrug of the shoulders, relit his pipe. Perhaps, after all, there would have been no more silver!

That evening seemed to the released man like a foretaste of paradise. He lay on a couch in Wu Ling's cabin, with the roof and sides rolled back and nothing but a cunning arrangement of mosquito netting between him and the violet twilight. Above was the moon and the brilliantly starlit night; on either side occasional groves of trees — trees growing almost down to the river's edge, some with poisonous odours, others almost sickly sweet. Sometimes there was a light from a distant village, but more often they were enveloped in a thick, velvety darkness. And they were pointing for the great port at the mouth of the river, and safety. The released man was sipping brandy and water, and smoking. His host sat opposite him, grave and enigmatic.

"I talk English little," Wu Ling said, "but I understand all. Speak your story, and tell how called."

The young man raised himself slightly.

"My name is Gregory Ballaston," he announced. "I am an Englishman, as you know, a traveller and fond of adventure. For years this story of the temple of Nilkaya has been in my brain. I heard all about it from some one who lived in Pekin for many years."

"The story?" Wu Ling enquired politely.

"In this temple," the young man narrated, "is a great statue of a Chinese god — Buddha, I suppose — and on either side of it are two smaller ones made from hard wood, marvellously carved, and, some say, a thousand years old. Each is supposed to be a counterpart of the greater God, and yet they demonstrate an amazingly presented allegory. They bear a likeness to one

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another, they bear a likeness to the God himself, but each is curiously different. In one you seem to trace the whole of the evil qualities which could ever enter into the character of man, and in the other, all the good qualities. One is hideous and the other beautiful. Yet, if you put them side by side and glance quickly from one to the other, the two seem to grow together so that the impression of the Image which is left in your mind is that of the great God above. They are called the Body and the Soul."

"This story I have heard," Wu Ling admitted.

"I have heard it many times, but I scarcely believed it — until I saw," the young man continued. "I had only a few minutes in the temple and there was danger all around, yet for a moment they took my breath away. I could scarcely move. Why, the man who fashioned them might have been an oriental Phidias."

"Proceed," Wu Ling begged.

"Well, the point of the story is this. Generations ago there was a great rising amongst the people, an invasion from the north, and robbers seem to have overrun the whole place. They sacked even the temples, and the priests — those who had warning of their coming — stripped their robes and their temples of all the precious stones which they possessed, and hid them."

"Hid them," Wu Ling repeated. "Ah!"

"Some of this story, you have, of course, heard," the young man went on, "because your trade brings you, I suppose, within a hundred miles of Nilkaya. The temples were rich in jewels — the emperors of China had sent them gifts for centuries — and the legend is that all the most valuable were concealed within these two Images — the Body and the Soul."

"That," Wu Ling commented, "is a strange story."

"As I told you," the young man continued, "I heard

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it from one who lived in Pekin and I believe that it is the truth. For centuries the priests have possessed a manuscript which has been handed down from one High Priest to the other, and this manuscript tells how these Images have been fashioned, so that there is within them a hollow place. There are directions for finding it, and for opening the Images, and they say that without these directions no man in the world could guess how to do it. I have spoken with one who has visited the temple, and who was not quite so much pressed for time as I was, who has seen these Images only a few feet away, and who insists upon it that there is not a sign of any possible aperture or any break in the wood."

"A simple thing," Wu Ling suggested blandly, "would be to break with choppers."

The young man raised his eyebrows.

"It is strange to hear you, a Chinaman, propose such a thing," he remarked. "I suppose any one who attempted it in this country would sooner or later be cut into small pieces, for these Images are blessed just as the larger one. But there is another reason against attempting such a thing. You are a very wonderful race, you Chinese, and you were more wonderful still, generations ago."

"Ah!" Wu Ling murmured.

"There are plenty of people," the young man proceeded, "who say that there is scarcely a discovery in the world which you have not anticipated and then declined to use because the central tenet of your religion and your philosophy was to leave things that are. Well, they say that you discovered gunpowder and all manner of explosives about the time these Images were fashioned. They must always, from the first, have been intended for a possible hiding place, for the old legend concerning them — I know this from the only European

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who has ever visited the temple — declared that if these are subjected to violence in any way, then the earthquake follows. The priests all believe this implicitly, and, although it sounds a far-fetched idea, the man who first told me the story is convinced that when the jewels were stored away inside, they were imbedded in some sort of explosive."

"It becomes more than ever a strange story," Wu Ling said didactically.

The young man looked searchingly for a moment at his host. Was it his fancy, he wondered, or was there a faint note of sardonic disbelief in his even tone?

"Of course," he went on, "it must sound to you, as it does to me, although you would scarcely understand the word, like rot, but the man from whom I heard it was a great person in Pekin, a friend even of the Emperor, and not only of the Emperor, but of the Emperor's great adviser whom some people think the greatest Chinaman who ever lived. He had privileges which had never before been extended to any European."

Wu Ling nodded gravely.

"So," he said, with the painstaking air of one trying to solve a problem, "you were seeking to take Images from temple, away from priests to whom belong, that you might possess jewels."

The young man coughed. Somehow or other Wu Ling's eyes were very penetrating.

"Well," he admitted, "I suppose in a way it was robbery, but robbery on a legitimate scale. I don't suppose you've read much European history, have you?"

"Read never," Wu Ling replied.

"That makes it difficult to explain," his companion regretted, pausing for a moment to breathe in, with great satisfaction, a gulp of the cool night air. "How-

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ever, most of the territories in different parts of the world which England possesses and a great deal of her inherited wealth, have come because centuries ago Englishmen went across the seas to every country in the world and helped themselves to pretty well what they wanted."

"That," Wu Ling remarked, "sounds like Wu Abst, the pirate."

Gregory Ballaston smiled.

"Well," he continued, "the invasion of a foreign country for purposes of aggrandisement is robbery, I suppose, only, you see, it is robbery on a big scale. We looked at this present affair in the same way. If it is true that there are a million pounds' worth of jewels in these images, what good can they possibly do to any one hidden there for centuries? No one could see them. No one could derive any good from them. Their very beauty is lost to the world. Robbery, if you like, Wu Ling, but not petty larceny."

Wu Ling shook his head with an uncomprehending smile.

"Of course you won't understand that," the other observed. "Still, what I mean to say is, that the very danger of the exploit, the fact that you risk your life — look how near I came to losing mine! — makes the enterprise almost worth while. Nothing mean about it, anyway."

"Ah!" Wu Ling murmured meditatively. "And now please tell, where Images?"

The young man was silent.

"That's a long story, Wu Ling," he sighed. "There were two of us in this. The other got away. He didn't desert me exactly. It was according to plan, but he had to leave first, and he left damned quick."

"And the Images?" Wu Ling persisted softly.

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Gregory Ballaston leaned back. The night had become a thing of splendour, the water, no longer yellow, but glittering with the reflection of the moon. They were passing through a narrow strip of country which might have been the garden of some great nobleman's palace. There were flowering shrubs down to the river's edge, a faint perfume of almond blossom, in the distance a stronger scent of something like eucalyptus, and all the time a divine silence. After his terrible quarters in the pirate ship this was a dream of luxury. The young man was full of gratitude to his benefactor, and yet he hesitated. Could one trust any Chinaman, even though he has saved one's life, with a secret like this?

"The Images no longer stand in the Temple, Wu Ling," he said, "but just where they are now I do not know. It was my part of the affair — if you understand military language — to fight a rearguard action. I did, but there were too many of them for me. They fought like furies, those priests. I might have killed them, but I hadn't the heart to do it. I shot one or two in the limbs, and then chucked it when I saw it was no use. Whether my friend succeeded in getting away with the Images or not, I shall not know for many days."

They passed a tiny village. From a plastered house with a curving roof, two lanterns were hanging. A girl's figure was dimly visible through the strings of thin bamboo, rustling musically together in the breeze. She was singing to a kind of guitar, an amazing melody, uncouth in its way, and unintelligible. Yet the young man turned over and smiled as he listened.

"Is there no other thing but money to be desired amongst you of the West," Wu Ling asked, "that even in youth you risk so much?"

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Gregory Ballaston clasped his hands behind his head. He was gazing steadily up at the stars, listening to the melody dying away in the distance. Although he addressed his companion, he had the air of one soliloquising.

"The further West you go, Wu Ling," he said, "the more you need money to taste life. Artistically, of course, it's all wrong, but then the world's all wrong. It's slipped out of shape somehow, during the last thousand years. We aren't natural any longer. The natural person accepts pleasure, but doesn't seek it. Directly you seek, you begin a terrible chase, and we're all seekers over westward, Wu Ling. We have lost the art of being. We have lost the gift of repose. We have lost the capacity for quiet enjoyments. Sport, ambitions and love-making have all joined in the *débâcle*. No one man can live alone and away from his fellows, even if he sees into the evil of these things. All life to us has come to run on wheels which need always the oil of money."

"And for the chance of gaining that," Wu Ling murmured, "you young Englishmen have come so far and risked your lives."

The young man looked round the cabin and beyond. There was a rack of rifles against the wall, boxes of ammunition which reached to the ceiling. The moonlight outside glinted now and then upon the muzzles of the Maxims.

"You yourself, Wu Ling," he pointed out, "run risks. For what? For the same thing. For wealth. You wouldn't carry those firearms unless you had trouble sometimes. You are past the time of life when an adventure alone appeals. You too seek wealth, and you seek it with Maxim guns and Enfield rifles to protect yourself."

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"There are evil men upon the river," Wu Ling admitted. "There are men like Abst and others, but these are for protection. We have a proverb in this country — 'The strong man only is safe.'"

"A wise saying," the young man acknowledged drowsily.

Wu Ling rose to his feet.

"Our guest must sleep," he said. "Soon the night will be cold and they will draw coverings over the netting."

"I'm awfully afraid I'm turning you out of your quarters," Gregory Ballaston apologised.

"I have others," was the courteous reply. "It is for sleep I leave you."

He passed out and, walking to the stern of the boat, stood pensively watching a little streak of silver left behind. Forward the young man slept — slept as he had never hoped to do again in this world. All through the night they made lazy progress towards the great city which fringed the ocean.

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CHAPTER II

Wu Ling, the trader, Chinese representative of the great house of Johnson and Company, at home and amongst his merchandise, was strangely installed. He sat in the remote corner of a huge warehouse, packed from floor to ceiling with an amazingly heterogeneous collection of all manner of articles. There were bales of cotton and calico goods from Manchester, woollens from Bradford, cases of firearms from Birmingham, and six great crates of American bicycles in the foreground. A Ford automobile stood in the middle of the floor, and, farther back, in the recesses of the room, which seemed to be of no particular shape, and which wandered into many corners, were piles of Chinese silks, shelf after shelf of china bowls and ivory statuettes. Hanging from the walls were mandarins' robes of green and blue, embroidered with many-coloured silks, fragments of brocade, and one great pictorial representation of the grounds of an emperor's palace, woven with miraculous skill into a background of pale blue material. From the more distant parts of the warehouse came an insidious, pungent odour, as of a perfume from which the life had gone but the faintness of which remained; a perfume which spread itself with gentle insistence into every corner of the place and seemed to envelop even its more sordid details with an air of mystery. In the great open yard, blue-smocked Chinamen were packing and unpacking in amazing silence. The only sound in the warehouse itself came from the clicking of a typewriter before which, on a plain deal bench, was seated a black-haired, sallow-faced youth in European clothes. From outside, there drifted in through the open window,

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in a confused medley, the strange noises of the quay, the patter of naked feet, the shrill cry of the porters and occasional screech of a siren. A white mist hung over the harbour; a hot, damp mist, concealing in patches the tangled mass of shipping. . . .

Into this curious chamber of commerce, ushered by a Chinese boy, came Gregory Ballaston, the Englishman whom Wu Ling had rescued a short while ago. The Chinese boy murmured something and departed. Wu Ling nodded a welcome to his visitor — a grave, reserved welcome.

"No gone England yet," he observed.

The young man sank into the chair which the other's gesture indicated. He had evidently found his clothes, for he was very correctly dressed in the European fashion. His manner was self-possessed and his voice level. Nevertheless his pallor was almost ghastly and there were still blue lines under his eyes. He had the air of a man who has been through some form of suffering.

"You have heard the story of my friend, Wu Ling?" he asked.

The Chinaman shook his head and pointed around.

"Much affairs," he explained. "Very busy. Smoke cigarette?"

Gregory Ballaston helped himself from the open box.

"My friend got away," he recounted; "reached Pekin and got safely on to the train. At some God-forsaken place on the way here, the train was held up. There seems to have been confusion for an hour or so. When the soldiers arrived, my friend was found with his throat cut, and the Chinaman who had been his guide and interpreter was killed too."

Wu Ling inclined his head gravely. The story was not an unusual one.

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"Robbers in China are bad men," he declared. "And the Images?"

The young Englishman touched his forehead. The heat was great and there were drops of moisture upon his fingers.

"One was still amongst the train baggage," he confided. "It is now safely on board the steamer. The other was taken away by the robbers."

Wu Ling reflected for several moments, looking downward upon the table. He seemed indisposed for speech, and presently his visitor continued.

"Of course," he went on, "according to the superstition, one is supposed to be worthless without the other. I am going to risk that, however. Mine is under lock and key in the purser's safe, and I sha'n't even look at it until we're well out of these seas."

"The steamer sail at four o'clock to-morrow," Wu Ling remarked, glancing at a chart.

The young man nodded.

"I have been on board already," he said. "I came back to pay my promised call upon you and to thank you once more for all you did for me."

Wu Ling waved his hand.

"It was nothing," he declared. "Wu Abst, bad man. If he had killed you, there would have been trouble on the river. My trading all disturbed. You safe now. Better leave the Image behind."

"I'm damned if I do," was the emphatic reply. "It's cost my pal's life and very nearly mine. I am going to stick to it."

Wu Ling was thoughtful. Apparently he was watching some of the porters at work in a distant corner of the warehouse.

"Which Image you have?" he enquired. "Body or Soul?"

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"I haven't undone the case," the young man answered. "I don't care which it is, so long as the jewels are in it."

"You think you get the jewels?" Wu Ling asked gently.

"If they are there, I shall," was the dogged reply. "Superstitions are all very well in a way, but a wooden image is a wooden image, after all."

Wu Ling said nothing. There was a curious significance about his silence which seemed somehow to embarrass his visitor, who rose presently to his feet and looked around. He was inspired with a desire to change the conversation.

"What an amazing place this is!" he exclaimed. "I suppose you have some wonderful Chinese things."

"We spend life collecting them," Wu Ling answered. "In return you see what we give," pointing to the bales of calico and woollen goods and the crates of bicycles. "Perhaps you care buy some curios?"

Gregory Ballaston shook his head.

"No money," he confessed. "I shall have to get a credit from the purser as it is."

Wu Ling rose slowly to his feet.

"Come," he enjoined. "I show you something. Follow!"

The young man, not altogether willing, followed his guide to the extreme end of that amazing warehouse, through a recess into a further dark room also filled with a strange conglomeration of articles from which seemed to come with even more troublous insistence the same curious odour, lifeless yet disturbing. Beyond was still another door towards which Wu Ling made his way. His companion hesitated.

"I have not a great deal of time," he said. "I want to see the Consul before the place closes."

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"You have time to see what I shall show," was the almost ominous rejoinder.

They paused before the door which, to Ballaston's surprise, was studded with great nails and of enormous strength. Wu Ling produced a long, thin key from his pocket, which he inserted into a very modern-looking aperture. The door swung ponderously open. Inside there was no window, nor apparently any form of ventilation, and again that odour, cloying and nauseating, swept out in stabbing little wafts, almost stupefying. The young man, confronted with a pool of darkness, would have drawn back, but there was suddenly a grip upon his arm like a ring of iron.

"Wait!" Wu Ling ordered. "There shall be light."

And immediately there was. From some unseen switch the dark chamber was flooded with the illumination of many electric bulbs. Ballaston gasped as he looked around. It was almost as though he had found his way into some Aladdin's cave. On shelves of red, highly polished wood were ranged lumps of jade and quartz, bowls of ancient china of which even his inexperience could gauge the pricelessness, silk coats, faded but marvellously embroidered, barbaric stones in open trays, a great circlet of Malay pearls, and, on a shelf alone, staring at him, bland and unmistakable, the other of the twin Images which he and his friend had dragged down from their pedestals in the Temple. Ballaston stared at it speechless. The face itself had a touch of sphinx-like mysticism, the remoteness of a god, the benevolence of a kindly spirit. The work in it seemed so slight; the result so prodigious. Ballaston found words at last.

"The other Image!" he cried. "Where did you get it?"

"In this city," Wu Ling explained, "nothing of this

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sort is sold unless it come first to us. Three nights since there appeared a messenger. I sought the man from whom he came at his hiding place in the city. With him I traded for the Image."

"You purchased it!" the young man gasped.

"Whom else?" was the composed reply. "In this country, from the dark forests of Northern Mongolia, the temples of Pekin, or the mines on the Siberian borders, all that there is for which men seek gold comes here. We pay. They sell."

"But you can't keep it," Ballaston exclaimed, "not in this country. The priests will hear. You will be forced to return it. If it belongs to any one ——"

He stopped short. Wu Ling read his thoughts and smiled.

"The priests of the temple, which you and your accomplice ravaged," he announced, "live no longer. They were murdered by the people many days ago, for their sin in permitting you to enter the temple. Furthermore, the Images are now defiled. The hand of the foreigner has touched them. They can never again take their place by the side of the Great Buddha. You bought with blood, and I with gold."

There was the sound of shuffling footsteps close at hand. An elderly man, dressed in shabby European clothes, stood behind them. He looked over their shoulders at the Image, and there was for a moment almost a glow in his worn and lined face.

"This," Wu Ling confided, "is a man of your race. He is of the firm — a partner — not because of business, but because he is a great scholar. He reads strange tongues, manuscripts from the monasteries of Thibet, the archives of ancient China. He was once a professor at one of your universities — Professor Endacott. He is now of the firm of Johnson and Company."

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The newcomer acknowledged indifferently the young man's greeting.

"You are looking at a very wonderful piece of carving," he said. "I once spent a year in Pekin to see that and its companion Image."

"Young man has other," Wu Ling explained blandly. "He and friend stole both from temple. This one come here — you know how. The other he has on ship, taking with him to England."

Endacott's whole frame seemed to stiffen. He frowned heavily. His tone carried a far-off note of sarcasm, which might have belonged to the days of his professorship.

"The young man has chosen as he would," he remarked. "He possesses the Body, and here, still in the land which gave it immortality, remains the Soul. Now they are separated. What will you do with your Image, young man, if you reach your country safely?"

"There is a legend of hidden jewels," was the eager reply. "You perhaps know of it."

"I know the legend well," the other admitted. "There is treasure in one, perhaps in both. Which do you think might hold the jewels — the Body or the Soul?"

"I am hoping that there are some in mine, anyhow," Ballaston answered.

"That may be," was the tranquil comment. "On the other hand, we may find the whole story to be an allegory. You may discover nothing but emptiness and disappointment in the Body. Here, at least, in the Soul, you find reflected by the divine skill of the craftsman, the jewels of pure living and spiritual thought. You were of Oxford, young man?"

"Magdalen."

"You have the air. Nearly all of your age and

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small vision scoff in your hearts at any religion which may seek to express the qualities for which that Image stands. It is your ill-fortune that you have the Body. When you are home you will unpack your case, you will place the Image amongst your treasures, and I can tell you, even though it is thirty years since I saw it, what you will see. You will see a brooding face and eyes cast down to the dunghills. You will see thick lips and coarse features. You will see expressed as glaringly as here you see the triumph of the spirit, the debasement of the body. You will watch your Image and you will sink. You will never look at it, you or others, without conceiving an unworthy thought, just as you could never look upon this one without feeling that some one has stretched down his hand, that somewhere there is a murmur of sweet voices speaking to you from above the clouds."

"But the jewels!" the young man persisted.

"Bah!" Endacott muttered, as he turned on his heel.

Ballaston, with wondering eyes, watched the erstwhile professor disappear.

"Looney!" he murmured, under his breath.

"I desire pardon," Wu Ling interpolated politely.

"A madman!"

Wu Ling smiled.

"He is a personage of great learning," he declared. "He is a friend of Chinese scholars who have never spoken to any other foreigner. He has great knowledge."

"What are you going to do with that?" Ballaston asked, motioning towards the Image.

Wu Ling sighed. He stood for a moment in silent thought, his eyes fixed upon his treasure. Then gently and almost with reverence he turned away, beckoned his

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companion to precede him, passed out and locked the door.

"Who can tell?" he ruminated. "We have a great warehouse here filled with strange goods, as you see, another and larger in Alexandria, an agent in New York. All the things come and go. We do not hurry. We have jade there which we have not even spoken of for twenty years, silk robes from the chests of him who was emperor, ivory carvings from his Summer Palace, denied even to the great merchants. Perhaps we sell. Perhaps not."

"You must be rolling in money," the young man sighed.

"I desire pardon," Wu Ling rejoined, mystified.

"You must be wealthy — very rich."

Wu Ling smiled tolerantly. He turned back, swung open once more the door, and turned on the light. He pointed to the Image, serene and benevolent.

"What counts money?" he murmured.

They were about halfway through the outer warehouse on their way to the lighter room beyond, when a thing happened so amazing that Ballaston stopped short and gripped his companion by the shoulder. Returning towards them was Endacott, and by his side a girl. She was dressed simply enough in the white clothes and shady straw hat which the climate demanded, but there were other things which made her appearance in such a place curiously incongruous. She broke off in her conversation and looked at Gregory Ballaston in frank astonishment. It was certainly an unusual meeting place for two young people of the modern world.

"I am taking my niece to see our new treasure," Mr. Endacott observed, a little stiffly. "Will you lend me the key, Wu Ling, or will you take us back yourself?"

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"I will return," Wu Ling replied gravely. "The young gentleman will excuse."

"If I too might be permitted one more glimpse," Ballaston begged.

The girl smiled at him and glanced at her companion. Mr. Endacott recalled the conventions of his past.

"I should like, my dear," he said, "to present our young visitor to you, but I am not sure that I remember his name, or that I have even heard it."

"Ballaston," the young man interposed, with some eagerness, "Gregory Ballaston."

"This, then, is my niece, Miss Claire Endacott," the ex-professor proceeded. "She will be your fellow traveller, I imagine, if you leave on to-morrow's steamer."

The two young people shook hands, and they all turned back into the recesses of the warehouse.

"You are coming to England?" Ballaston asked.

She nodded.

"It is so nice to meet some one who is going to be on the ship," she said. "I came from New York here last month, knowing scarcely a soul."

After that they remained without speech for a few moments. Somehow or other their surroundings and their mission seemed to demand silence. Wu Ling gravely opened the door and turned up the light. The girl drew a little breath of joy as she gazed at the Image.

"But that is wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"It is the work of a great master," her uncle explained gravely. "The hand which fashioned that Image was the hand of a man who knew the secrets of the ages, who came as near the knowledge of what eternity means as any man may. There is much to think about — little to speak of."

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Their silence was the silence of entrancement; Ballaston's attention alone curiously distracted. It was a strange environment for her modern and vivid beauty, this chamber with its clinging odours, its ancient treasures of silk and ivory, the time-defying Image gazing serenely past them. Wu Ling and Endacott himself seemed entirely in the setting; the girl, with her masses of yellow hair and almost eagerly joyous expression, a butterfly wandered by chance into a vault. Yet he had another impression of her before they left. He caught a glimpse of her parted lips, the strained light in her clear, grey eyes, as though in a sense her spiritual self were reaching out towards the allegory of the Image. Then her uncle gave the signal. Wu Ling gravely switched off the light and they trooped back into the warehouse.

"Somehow," the girl reflected — "I suppose it is because I have just come from the art classes and the museums of New York — I feel as though that were the first real thing I have ever seen in my life."

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CHAPTER III

"WELL," Claire exclaimed, laughing at Gregory Ballaston across the table, "how have you enjoyed your dinner?"

"Immensely," he answered, with enthusiasm.

"Have you ever dined more strangely?"

"I don't think I have," he confessed. "It was most frightfully kind of your uncle to ask me. I was never so surprised in my life."

"Nor I," she admitted candidly. "To tell you the truth, when we all came together in the warehouse this afternoon, it seemed to me from his manner that you were not particularly good friends, and I was afraid he was going to hurry me off without a word. Then your intense curiosity to have another look at that Image ——"

"Entirely assumed," he interrupted. "I wanted a chance to be introduced to you."

"Of course that wasn't in the least obvious," she laughed. "Anyhow, even then I never dreamed of this. It was just when you were going that he asked your name again and seemed so interested. Do you realise that he must know something about you or your family?"

"I wondered," Gregory admitted.

She glanced at the door through which her uncle had disappeared in search of cigarettes.

"Anyhow," she continued, "it is delightful to think that you are going to be a fellow passenger on the *Kalatat*. Don't you sympathise with me for being rather glad to get away from here?"

He looked around at the almost empty room, at the comfortless linoleum upon the floor, the Chinese servants,

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moving like ghosts about the table, at the cane-bottomed chairs, the few articles of cheap furniture. It was an amazing environment.

"Your uncle," he remarked, a little hesitatingly, "apart from his household surroundings, seems to be a man of great taste."

"He has wonderful knowledge," she said, "and a wonderful sense of beauty, but he lives absolutely within himself. I am perfectly certain he doesn't know that he has eaten curried chicken and rice every night for a week. Why, if I hadn't thought of it, we'd have had nothing but water for dinner."

"You're a good Samaritan," he murmured.

"Come and sit outside," she invited. "The verandah is the only possible place here. We're a great deal too near the rest of the houses, but the city looks almost beautiful now the lights are out, and the harbour is wonderful. The chairs, as you will discover, are horrible, and there isn't a cushion in the place."

"Tell me about yourself," he begged, when they were established, "and why you came here."

"You see," she confided, "Mr. Endacott's brother, my father, was a professor at Harvard. He died when I was eleven years old and my mother died a year afterwards. I was sent to boarding school in Boston and New York. When I was nineteen I was to be sent either to an aunt in England or to my uncle here. My aunt in England lives at a place which reminds me of your name — Market Ballaston, it is called."

He looked at her in astonishment.

"Why, that is where I live!" he exclaimed. "Tell me your aunt's name?"

"De Fourgenet," she replied. "She married a Frenchman, the Comte de Fourgenet."

"Good God! Madame!"

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"Madame?"

"That is what we call your aunt in the neighbourhood," he explained. "She is my father's greatest friend. You know, of course, that she is an invalid."

"I have heard so," the girl admitted. "A motor accident, wasn't it? . . . Uncle," she went on, as he stepped through the window, "do you realise that Mr. Ballaston knows Aunt Angèle?"

"I imagined that he might," Mr. Endacott acknowledged, a little drily. "It was not until I heard your name for the second time," he continued, turning to the younger man, "that I realised who you must be."

"It is a very small world," Gregory Ballaston remarked tritely, as he accepted one of the cigars which Mr. Endacott was offering.

"Geographically it has contracted for me during the last twenty-five years into a radius of a few miles round the city here," Mr. Endacott confided. "To come back into the world again at my time of life will seem strange."

"But you won't really mind it," the girl assured him. "You will find a country house not too far from Aunt Angèle, you will have all your manuscripts, your books, your treasures round you. It is true, isn't it, that you sit in your little office every day without stirring? Why, you can do the same thing in England as here. And then, there must be some of your old Oxford friends who would like to see you."

Mr. Endacott smiled thinly.

"Thirty years," he reminded her, "is a long way to look back. To pick up the threads, the friendships dropped more than a quarter of a century ago, is not easy. At the same time," he went on, "it is right that I should return to England. It marches well with affairs here."

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"You must have found the life out in these parts very interesting, sir," Gregory Ballaston remarked. "I don't know whether it would get monotonous to you, but to any one coming upon it suddenly it is an amazing corner of the world. Off the ship, I have only seen three Europeans since I have been here."

"It is for that reason," Mr. Endacott pointed out, "an unsuitable place for my niece. My establishment here, too, is impossible. No European woman could keep house under the prevailing conditions. That is why I am hurrying my niece off, although I myself shall follow before long."

"My father will be interested to see you again," Gregory ventured.

"Your father, if his tastes had lain that way," Mr. Endacott ruminated, "might have been a brilliant scholar. He preferred sport and life. We met, not so many years ago, in Pekin. He was dabbling in diplomacy then. He certainly had the gifts for it. He was, in fact, the most popular Englishman who ever appeared at the Court there. He was received and granted privileges where I could never follow him. He was, I suppose, your instigator in this buccaneering expedition of yours."

The young man laughed a little uneasily. There had been a vein of contempt in the other's tone.

"I suppose it must have seemed a horrible piece of vandalism to you, sir," he remarked. "However, there it is. The adventure appealed to me and we wanted the money badly enough."

His host looked out across the harbour at the swaying lanterns of the small boats and beyond to the great lighthouse.

"Money!" he repeated. "The password of the West. Somehow I never thought I should return to it."

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"Money counts for something out here, too," Gregory protested. "Look at your friend and partner, Wu Ling, trading up the river with machine guns and rifles to protect himself. For what? To make money. He's doing it for Johnson and Company. You're one of the firm, Mr. Endacott."

The latter nodded.

"*Touché*," he admitted. "But let me point out to you, young gentleman, that the things Wu Ling brings back to our warehouses are things of beauty."

"Which he pays for with rubbish," Gregory rejoined. "Half of your warehouse is an abomination; the other half, I admit, a treasure house."

Mr. Endacott gently inclined his head.

"I cannot defend myself," he acknowledged. "I am a partner in the firm because they insisted. All my savings for twenty years, which I advanced to them, were, they tell me, the foundation from which the business has been built up. But, believe me, I have never seen inside a ledger. Once every twelve months, a strange little man brings me a slip of paper. I look at it, and the business for the year is finished."

"It is perhaps as well," Gregory observed, "that your associates are probably honest. Wu Ling, for instance."

"Wu Ling is an amazing person," Mr. Endacott pronounced.

"Is he altogether Chinese?" Gregory enquired. "There have been times when he has puzzled me."

"No one but Wu Ling knows who Wu Ling is or where he comes from," was the enigmatic reply. "He is a power unto himself."

"He saved my life," Gregory remarked, "but I don't think that he approves of me."

"Tell me, Mr. Ballaston," the girl asked, "have you

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looked at your Image yet, the one you have on the ship? "

"Not yet."

Mr. Endacott turned his head. He was seated on the most uncomfortable of the three uncomfortable cane chairs; a stiff, unbending figure. His eyes were turned speculatively upon his visitor.

"If there be any truth in the legend," he advised, "you will do well to leave it in its case."

Gregory was doubtful.

"I rather wanted to examine it," he admitted. "The part of the legend which interests me most is the part which has to do with the jewels."

"Naturally," Mr. Endacott agreed, with unconcealed sarcasm. "Yet, in the story of the fashioning of the Images, there has been nothing more vehement than the warning issued by the High Priest in whose day it was done. Here, he pointed out, by the great art of the sculptor, the Body and Soul were torn apart. All that was good and virtuous and that made towards the beautiful in life was carven into the Image which our friend Wu Ling seems to have purchased from the robber. All that was debased and evil and which prompted towards sin was graven into the features of the one which you possess. Together, side by side, they were supposed to make up the sum of humanity — the good and the evil balancing. Side by side, they might be looked at without evil effect; they might inspire thought — reflection of the highest order. There were indications there of what to avoid, what passions to fight against; indications there, too, of what a man's aim should be, how to uplift oneself above sin and how to climb always in one's thoughts towards the spiritual."

They both listened, fascinated, to Mr. Endacott's thin, reedy voice; his still words, spoken without em-

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phasis or enthusiasm, as they might have been spoken to a class of student philosophers. It was the girl who first ventured upon a question.

"But, Uncle," she demanded, "you don't seriously believe that to live with either of these statues without the other could really affect any one's character?"

"So runs the legend," was the quiet, almost solemn reply. "So it is written in one of the manuscripts recording their history. The superstition, if it be a superstition, has at least a logical basis. An environment of beauty and spirituality tends towards holiness; an environment of bestiality must, on the other hand, in time debase. Before these Images were fashioned, the philosophers of past ages used their symbolism for a text, 'If thou wouldst be holy, live with holy and spiritual things. If thou wouldst avoid sin, turn thy back upon the presentment of evil'."

"But you don't really suppose, sir," Gregory ventured, "although, of course, the idea is beautiful, that there is anything supernatural in the influence which those Images might bring to bear upon any one's life?"

"My dear young man," Mr. Endacott expounded, "I do not even know what empires of thought the word supernatural covers. I have pointed out the logical basis for such a teaching. That is all. We are in a world here where one does not lightly reject superstitions. In the West there exists a great world reared to the gods of materialism, unwarmed with the flame of spirituality; the world of gold and stone and huge banking accounts, and prosperous cities, and hurrying, hastening lives. The Western brain holds no corner for superstitions, but casts them scornfully away. Live here for twenty years and you find the brain more elastic, its cells more receptive, even its philosophy less inevitably based upon the fundamental but dry-as-dust

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mathematical principles. Keep your Image in its packing case, Mr. Gregory Ballaston. It will be time enough when you get home to search for the jewels."

The 'rickshaw which Gregory had ordered came lumbering up the hill. He rose with reluctance. Even in her stiff, uncomfortable chair, there was something very attractive about Claire, as she lay with her hands clasped behind her head, the light of a lantern upon her suddenly thoughtful face. He reflected, however, with a little thrill of pleasure, that for six weeks she would be more or less his companion.

"If we don't meet again before I sail, sir," he begged, turning towards his host, "let me thank you for your hospitality. It will be a great pleasure to see you and your niece in Norfolk."

"This must be our farewell for the present, at any rate," Mr. Endacott said, as he shook hands. "My niece is going on board early to-morrow morning, as I myself have a meeting to attend in the afternoon. My respects to your father. We shall meet without a doubt in England."

"And we," Gregory added, in a lower tone, as he bent over his young hostess' fingers, "shall meet before then."

She looked up at him, smiling. They were young and he was very good-looking. Nevertheless she was American-trained, and it was in a spirit of frank comradeship that she replied.

"I know that we shall have a lovely time on the voyage. Until to-morrow, then!"

Gregory Ballaston was carried down the rough road, past the tangle of high modern buildings — rabbit warrens of humanity — past the plastered and wooden structures of older days, with their curved roofs and narrow windows, through the confused streets which at

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every step became more thronged, towards the harbour, taking very little note of his progress, his thoughts engrossed, his mind fixed upon one problem. Already the memory of that strange meal, amidst surroundings so sordid that even the girl's presence had been unable to modify them, was becoming overshadowed. His late host's cold words of advice seemed to have made not the slightest impression upon him. He thought of the small packing case in the purser's office with almost feverish impatience, joyful of the permission to sleep on board for the night, anxious only for the moment when he should reach the quay. Somehow or other Endacott's serious, stilted talk had immensely confirmed his belief in the existence of the jewels, and as for the rest — the warning he had received — this, in all probability, simply proceeded from the vapourings of a mind steeped in Orientalism, the mind of a scholar, removed for half a lifetime from the whole world of common sense and possibilities. Morally, he was as other young men. He would have scorned to cheat or lie; he had an inherited sense of honour and a sportsman's probity. A mean action would have revolted him — he was capable of a great one. He was a little selfish, a little narrow in his pride of name and race, as courageous as any man might be, with the undoubted conceit of his class. Such as he was, he had no fear of change. He had never indulged in self-analysis. He accepted himself for what he was, which, on the whole, was something a little better than the average. He had no presentiment of even temporary ill-fortune, as he stepped into the ship's boat waiting by the quay, and looked eagerly across the harbour to where the great steamer lay anchored with her blazing line of lights.

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CHAPTER IV

At very nearly the hour of his former visit, Gregory Ballaston entered the warehouse of Messrs. Johnson and Company, on the following morning. Wu Ling, seated at his table, waved away the stolid-looking native foreman to whom he was giving orders, and glanced enquiringly at his visitor.

"Ship not gone?" he asked.

"We don't sail until the afternoon," Gregory reminded him. "Haven't got all our fresh stores shipped, or something. I came back to have a talk. Do you mind?"

Wu Ling's gesture was noncommittal. The young man continued.

"Last night," he confided, sinking into a chair, "I unpacked my Image. I took it out and looked at it, with my porthole closed and my door locked, although I imagine that now that the priests are dead there is no fear of my being followed. — Wu Ling, I wish to God that you were an Englishman!"

"Why for?"

"I could talk to you more easily."

There was a brief silence. Wu Ling, stolid, powerful, imperturbable, sat with his keen enquiring eyes fixed upon his visitor. Gregory showed signs of some slight relapse from his well-being of the day before. His natural, bronzed complexion which had almost reasserted itself, seemed to have given place again to the pallor which denoted a sleepless night. There were lines under his eyes, a restlessness in his manner.

"You found Image bad company?" Wu Ling enquired.

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"I hate the beastly thing already," Gregory acknowledged.

Wu Ling clapped his hands softly together. The screen of bamboos was pushed to one side and Mr. Endacott appeared. He had discarded his European clothes in favour of the dress of a native Chinese gentleman, and he carried a white umbrella.

"Our young friend again," he remarked, with a brief salutation.

Wu Ling pointed to a chair.

"He wish talk to you."

Mr. Endacott glanced at his watch before he sat down.

"I am about to visit the head of the Chinese University here," he announced. "A man of rare intelligence and great learning! Why should I waste my time? Have you found the jewels in your Image, Mr. Ballaston?"

"Not a sign of them up to the present, sir," Gregory admitted. "I am not very happy about them, either. As you know, the whole thing was a pretty dangerous enterprise, and I've only half succeeded. The Image is heavy enough, but I can't see any possible aperture anywhere."

"The recovery of the jewels," Mr. Endacott remarked, leaning a little forward, with his hands clasped upon the knob of his umbrella, "was scarcely likely to be a simple matter."

"I realise that," Gregory confessed. "Already I am beginning to feel a sort of hatred of the thing. For the first time last night," he went on, "I felt inclined to take seriously what Wu Ling here and you have said of these Images; that neither of them has any real existence separately. Side by side they have looked down upon that procession of worshippers through all

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these years. Side by side they must be, you have told me, according to the superstition, if the jewels are to be found."

Mr. Endacott inclined his head.

"Our young friend is showing signs of intelligence," he admitted. "He is beginning to travel along the lines of the allegory."

"If this is true," Gregory asked bluntly, "what is the use of my taking one to England and leaving the other here in this warehouse?"

"The only reason for such a course seems to be," his companion murmured, "that one does not belong to you. Perhaps you can trade with the firm. I myself am not a trader. Wu Ling is. Wu Ling, I am sure, is at your disposal."

"How can I trade?" Gregory demanded. "What do you suppose brought me out here on an enterprise like this? Love of adventure a good deal, I grant you, but, behind it all, sheer and absolute need of money. We are poor in England to-day, Mr. Endacott, we people with estates. I haven't the money to buy your Image. After my experience of last night I would rather consider an offer from you for mine."

Wu Ling smiled. He talked for a moment in Chinese to his companion. The latter showed signs of agreement.

"Wu Ling's attitude is mine," Mr. Endacott pronounced. "If by any chance you had acquired the statue we possess and we had yours, the firm of Johnson and Company would trade. Not now. We are content."

"Then you don't believe in your own allegory?" Gregory queried.

Wu Ling was looking into the dark recesses of the warehouse. There was nothing to indicate that he had heard or understood, but it was he who replied.

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"Yes, I believe in it," he admitted. "We both believe in it, but we have many jewels and I think that these will be hard to find."

"If you had both the Images," Gregory suggested, "you could break them up."

Mr. Endacott raised his hand to his forehead as though in pain. Wu Ling's expression appeared unchanged. Yet somehow or other he gave one the impression of having listened with distaste to words of blasphemy.

"You speak like a huckster from the new cities," Mr. Endacott said wearily. "They are great works of art, these Images, sanctified by the years, alive by virtue of their greatness. To raise a hand against them would be barbarous. Besides, Wu Ling and I believe the legend. We believe that those will die who treat the Images roughly."

Gregory remained discontented. He took a cigarette from the large wooden box which Wu Ling pushed towards him. The box was of some sort of sandalwood, but it, too, seemed to give out the peculiar odour of the place.

"Last night," he confided, "when I sat alone with my Image, it came back to me how my father himself had insisted upon the necessity for securing both Images. He too must have been impressed by the legend. He'll think my errand a failure if I return with one."

"Without money how buy?" Wu Ling asked. "Johnson and Company, we are traders. For gold we sell anything on earth. Without gold, how can buy?"

"It is a problem," Gregory admitted gloomily.

"You had, perhaps, a proposition?" Mr. Endacott suggested.

"Something of the sort. That is why I came to see you this morning. I wondered whether you would let

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me take your Image to England with mine, and, whilst they were together, have them examined in the British Museum, and see if any possible trace of opening or access to the interior of them is to be found? Of course, I shall do that with mine when I get there, anyhow, but you see I am beginning to fall in line with your superstition. I feel that both Images ought to be treated at the same time."

"And if the jewels should be discovered?" Mr. Endacott enquired.

"We would divide equally," was Gregory's prompt proposal.

Wu Ling, a man not given to gestures, beat the air in front of him gently with the fingers of his hands.

"We would not agree," he said. "I would not agree. Mr. Endacott would not agree. Our partner, who is not here, would not agree."

Gregory frowned. He followed Wu Ling's steadfast gaze, followed it into the further recesses of the second warehouse. He began to think of the Image he had lost, the Image in the steel chamber. A sense of its beauty suddenly possessed him. He coveted it passionately.

"In a way," he ventured, "the Image which you have locked up there, the Image which you call the Soul, rather belongs to me, don't you think? I have, at least, a claim upon it. I fought to secure it. My friend lost his life in defending it."

Wu Ling's smile was almost a genuine effort at mirth. Mr. Endacott chuckled sardonically.

"If I were you, young man," he advised, "I don't think that I would pursue that line of argument."

"It was stolen property," Gregory persisted doggedly.

"And the stolen property was stolen," Mr. Endacott reminded him.

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There was a silence. An *impasse* seemed to have been reached. It seemed indeed as though there were nothing more to be done, no further argument he could use. Yet Gregory Ballaston sat as though rooted to the spot. To leave the place with his desire unattained seemed almost a physical impossibility. Then, unexpectedly, Wu Ling spoke at some length.

"What you come here to say," he began, "has reason. You come here with an idea which is right. Body and Soul you cannot part. Your Image without that one which belongs to Johnson and Company is a thing of evil. The Image we have locked in our treasure chamber is a thing of great beauty, and no more. You who desire the jewels cannot buy. We, to whom the jewels mean little, will not sell. Listen to me, young gentleman. I propose something."

"Go on," Gregory begged eagerly.

"You," Wu Ling continued, "have a quality of the Chinese in you, or you would not have risked life for this adventure. You are gambler. Me too. I offer this. I will gamble with you for the two Images."

Gregory Ballaston held his cigarette away from his mouth and stared at the speaker. Temporarily, at any rate, his nonchalance had left him.

"Are you in earnest?" he demanded.

Wu Ling nodded gravely. Gregory glanced towards the professor. The latter also inclined his head gently.

"If Wu Ling says so," he murmured.

"Gamble! But how? What games do we both know?"

"There is a Chinese game," Wu Ling began ——

"Not having any," Gregory interrupted drily. "I have heard of these Chinese games. What about poker?"

"Not understand," Wu Ling regretted.

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Gregory sat for a moment or two deep in disturbed thought. More than anything he had ever coveted in the world he coveted that other Image.

"Look here," he decided at last, "I accept. But we don't need to play a game at all. Send for a pack of cards, have them well shuffled and deal a card to each of us. The highest wins."

Wu Ling nodded approvingly.

"It is simple," he assented. "We do that. If you win, my porters shall pack Image and you can take it to ship. If you lose you bring yours here."

Gregory moistened his lips which were already a little dry.

"It is agreed," he said.

Wu Ling opened one of the lower drawers of his desk. He searched for a few moments and then produced an ordinary pack of playing cards. He laid them upon the table.

"In here?" Gregory demanded, glancing at the silent forms, always moving around them.

"Why not?" Wu Ling replied. "What we do is nothing to them. They see nothing. They work."

Mr. Endacott chuckled as he took the cards in his hands and shuffled them.

"You will lose, young man," he warned Gregory. "I've seen a great many games of cards in this city, but I have never yet seen a European who could hold his own against a Chinese."

"This isn't a game," Gregory pointed out. "It's just a show-down. My chance must be as good as his. We'll make it the best of three, though."

"How?" Wu Ling queried politely.

"A card each three times," his partner explained, "and the one who wins twice out of three times gets the Images. It appears to me that I too am rather largely

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interested in this. Any choice as to who turns the first card up?"

Gregory shook his head, cut the cards which were handed to him, and passed them to Wu Ling. The latter hesitated only for the fraction of a second. Then he threw one card to his opponent and one to himself. Gregory's card was a knave; his own a queen.

"One up to the firm," Mr. Endacott observed.

Gregory took the cards. His hands were beginning to shake. He gave his opponent a four. He himself threw down a ten.

"One each," he exclaimed, trying his best to keep his tone level.

He shuffled and passed the cards across once more. Wu Ling sat for a moment toying with them, almost as though in silent prayer. Then he threw a card to Gregory.

"A king!" the latter cried exultantly.

"And the firm has an ace," Mr. Endacott pointed out, as Wu Ling's card fell upon the table.

Gregory sat staring at it, motionless and rigid, the light of triumph fading from his face. There had been gamblers in his family, though, and heredity asserted itself. He rose calmly to his feet.

"I'll go down and pack the Image," he said.

Wu Ling clapped his hands. His expression had never varied. He showed no signs, even of content.

"There will be porters who attend you," he announced. "They will follow your 'rickshaw and bring back the Image."

Gregory held out his hand, even then scarcely realising the position. All this risk and privation for nothing, his friend's life for nothing, all gone on the turn of a card. For a moment the place with its strange atmosphere seemed unreal, his adventure a nightmare. Then

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he heard Wu Ling giving orders to the foreman and saw him point to the harbour. He choked down his feelings.

"I shall not sympathise with you," Mr. Endacott said, as he shook hands. "Your enterprise has never commended itself to me, and your possession of the Body without the Soul was never a thing to be envied."

Gregory could not trust himself to reply. He held out his hand to Wu Ling, who took it gravely.

"At least, Wu Ling," he said, "if you have spoilt my trip out here, you saved my life. I don't think it's worth much, but I thank you. Send the porters along."

He turned and left the place; a tall, slim figure, graceful and trim in his well-fitting clothes, the strangest contrast to the blue-smocked coolies and one or two native traders through whom he had almost to push his way. He walked out into the broiling sun and disappeared.

Mr. Endacott glanced at Wu Ling, and Wu Ling, with the cards in his hand, smiled back at him.

The morning wore on, the afternoon came and passed. Mr. Endacott, who had spent a pleasant few hours with his Chinese friend, returned to find repose reigning throughout the rambling premises of Messrs. Johnson and Company. A fierce sun had suddenly blazed once more through the drifting masses of mist — gone now, as breath from a looking-glass. The water in the harbour was indigo blue, the junks and dhows and native fishing craft were all becalmed, like painted ships upon a still ocean. The sirens blew no more. All who could were at rest. The porters in the warehouse had crept into the dark shady corners and lay there motionless. Half a dozen clerks, young men of superior station who wore European clothes and babbled a little English, had retired to the shelter of an adjoining tea house. Only

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Wu Ling sat still in his place, waiting. Mr. Endacott took in the situation at a glance.

"They have not returned, our porters?" he enquired.

"Not yet."

"And the ship sails?"

"It is past due."

Endacott smiled.

"The truth is as old as life," he said. "The things which are written here are written behind the veil. That young man came from what, from a Western point of view, we used to think good stock. His father was under me at Oxford. His grandfather and generations before him were men of good repute. Still, that counts for nothing, and we know why. He has the Body. Why wait, Wu Ling?"

"You think that his word it is broken," the latter asked, "broken to us who scorned even to watch him to the ship?"

Mr. Endacott shook his head.

"He has the Body," he repeated.

There was a pattering of feet outside; feet that passed swiftly across the pavement of blistered heat. A little troop of porters entered and sought shelter. The foreman advanced and stood silent before Wu Ling's desk.

"Speak," Wu Ling directed.

"We waited on the dock," the man recounted. "We waited in the heat. Hours went by. Then, as the ship moved away, the Englishman leaned over the rail. He called out to us, 'There is nothing to send back.' Then he disappeared."

"So you returned," Wu Ling murmured.

"So we returned," the man assented.

Wu Ling rose to his feet and stood at the window. There was a clamour of sirens blowing through the

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sultry, stagnant air, a waving of handkerchiefs from a distant dock. A great steamer was drifting out, her bows set westward. Wu Ling watched her gathering speed through the lazy sea, leaving behind her a wake like a rope of snow in the deep blue of the waters which she parted. The smoke belched from her funnels. Somewhere on board her was Gregory Ballaston and his booty. Endacott laid his hand upon the arm of Wu Ling whom he loved.

"The young man has done ill," he said, "but the Soul is ours."

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CHAPTER V

"STEWARD," Gregory asked him, standing up in the center of his stateroom, his hands behind his back, "do I look drunk?"

The steward was used to eccentric passengers and answered as though the question were an entirely reasonable one.

"For a young gentleman as hasn't moved out of his stateroom for two days, and 'as had a good deal more to drink than to eat," he pronounced, "you look wonderful, sir."

"Fetch me a whisky and soda, then."

"Certainly, sir."

The man withdrew, closing the door behind him. Gregory drew back the curtain of his upper bunk and again, with tireless eyes, he stared at the treasure which had cost him his friend's life, and, as it seemed to him sometimes now, especially in those horrible watches of the night, his own honour. Always there was the same fascination. Every time he looked, he fancied that he discovered some fresh horror in that grim yet superbly bestial face.

"You are ugly," he said softly, as he dropped the curtain. "You are damnably ugly! I wish you were at the bottom of the sea, and yet I can't part with you."

The steward brought him the whisky and soda. He paused for a moment before drinking it.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Perkins, sir."

"Well then, Perkins," he directed, "please see the second steward for me. Try to get me a small table in the saloon, alone in a corner, and I will go in to dinner to-night."

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"Very good, sir," the man replied, as he made his exit. "There will be plenty of room to sit just where you please until we get to Bombay."

Once more Gregory pushed aside the curtain, raised his glass and drained its contents, his eyes fixed all the time upon the Image. He set down the empty tumbler.

"That's what you like; to see me drink, isn't it?" he murmured softly. "You'd like the whole world to be as foul as the things some devil has carved into your face. Yet I suppose I would forgive you if only you would give up your secret."

For the hundredth time he passed his fingers over the carved head; fingers which were long and slim and sensitive of touch. Nowhere, however, could they discover the slightest sign of any join or any possible aperture, however cunningly concealed. The wood had become as smooth and hard as marble, black as jet, shining as though with generations of polish. Gregory drew the curtain and turned away, baffled once more. With his back turned to the Image he made a long and deliberate toilet. Afterwards he lit a cigarette and for the first time since he had boarded the steamer, ventured on deck to find only a few people promenading, a dozen or so drinking cocktails in the smoking room. There was no sign of the person he longed yet dreaded to see. The heat was great but it was not unusually oppressive. In the west, a blood-red sun, pencils of black cloud surrounding it, seemed almost to be falling into the ocean. Gregory loitered about until long after the bugle had sounded, and then, summoning up all his courage, descended to take his place in the saloon. The second steward hurried forward to meet him and showed him his table. He breathed a sigh of relief as he realised its isolation.

"I have given you a table to yourself, sir, as Perkins

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seemed to think you wanted it," he announced, "but if you would care for a seat at the captain's table — that was where we had intended to put you — it could be arranged now, if you preferred it."

"Not on any account," Gregory begged earnestly. "I've been laid up. Must be quiet. This exactly suits me."

He continued a conversation for some minutes, accepted the wine list, studied the menu, gave his orders, and finally ventured to look around. She was there, seated on the right hand of the captain, her inevitable place under the circumstances. Their eyes met. Without hesitation she smiled a greeting. Gregory half rose in his place and bowed. When he sat down he realised that both his hands were clenched, the white of the knuckles showing through the skin. His breath was coming a little quickly. It was an absurd thing but he had a feeling that he had passed through one of the crises of his life. There had been no message then from her uncle — no wireless. She knew nothing.

Afterwards he came across her on deck, talking to an elderly woman whom he realised must be the Mrs. Hichens of whom she had spoken as a possible chaperone. She turned round at once and welcomed him smilingly. There was a shade of reproach in her tone.

"I was beginning to wonder what had become of you, Mr. Ballaston," she said. "Let me present you to my chaperone, Mrs. Hichens."

Gregory acknowledged the introduction and spent the next few minutes searching for and arranging their chairs.

"I suppose I have been outrageously lazy," he confessed, when at last he had installed them. "That trip of mine into the interior, which you heard me speaking of with your uncle, was rather an exhausting affair."

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"Some day you must tell me the whole story," she begged. "The snatches I heard of it were most romantic. You came back in Wu Ling's trading schooner, didn't you?"

"Wu Ling," Gregory confided, "saved my life, and brought me back to the city. I got into trouble. I was certainly somewhere where I had no right to be, and I was handed over to Wu Abst, the famous pirate, by a couple of fanatical priests, with instructions that I was to become nourishment for the alligators. Wu Ling heard about it at one of the villages where he was trading and released me. It sounds like a page from somebody's novel, doesn't it? It was all very real at the time, though."

They both looked at him curiously, but the older woman had lived for some time in a country where few questions were asked, and Claire was more concerned with the shadow of either pain or sleeplessness which seemed to darken his face.

"I can quite understand your feeling like a rest," she said sympathetically. "I thought you looked terribly ill the day we met in the warehouse."

She picked up a book, merely with the idea of giving him an opportunity to pass on if he cared to, but after strolling about the deck aimlessly for a quarter of an hour, he returned to find her with her book still unopened, her mind, as a matter of fact, occupied with him and his story. She accepted immediately his invitation to walk. They went on to the upper deck and looked down together at the oily water with its streak of phosphorescence. They talked of the ship, of such of their fellow passengers as they had observed, and of the route home, with a certain obvious attempt at casualness; conversation of little import, yet almost a necessary stepping-stone to more intimate understand-

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ing. Claire's perceptions were keen enough for her to realise that this young man was scarcely in a normal condition.

"You have had no wireless from your uncle or from the firm since you left?" he asked, a little abruptly.

She shook her head.

"You asked me that before," she reminded him. "Why on earth should I? We said good-by early in the morning after the night you dined with us. Uncle would never dream of coming to see me off. He hates steamers and he hates what he calls 'looking westwards.' How he will survive life in England I am sure I can't imagine, except that he does sometimes still admit that English country life is wonderful."

"He really means to come then?"

"Why, surely."

"And you? Shall you like it?"

She assented a little doubtfully.

"I think I would rather live in New York," she confessed, "but I can't fancy Uncle there. I think that would be expecting a little too much of him. He still has friends and a few relatives in England."

"Pretty sporting of him to break away at all," Gregory observed, "after all these years."

"I think it is marvellous," she agreed. "I am sure if I hadn't come, he'd rather go on living in that strange, smelly little house of his and read Chinese manuscripts and interpret Chinese hieroglyphics round old ornaments, and talk Chinese literature with some of the quaintest-looking people you ever saw up at the University, than do anything else in the world."

"All the same," Gregory remarked, "they say that a man should always return to the country of his birth to end his days. Besides, China is no place for an Englishman after a certain number of years. He'd become

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nothing but an old fossil without the society of his own kind."

"What a nice, consoling person you are," she declared. "Sometimes I've had it on my conscience a little that I'm taking him away from the things he likes best in life."

"I shouldn't worry about that," he told her. "He'll be better at home amongst some of his old cronies, and for you — well, of course, China would be utterly impossible."

"I am very happy to be going to England," she assured him. "I am looking forward to the country life immensely."

"Fond of games?" he asked her.

"Riding and tennis are the extent of my accomplishments," she replied. "I like those. And then, after a year or so I shall hope to travel on the Continent. My aunt still has a great many friends in Paris."

"One meets so many American women and girls in France and Italy," he observed, "and so few men. Why are they such stay at homes?"

"They aren't," she explained. "They travel, but they want something out of it. They either prospect for mines, or look for markets, or something of that sort."

"In a way then, they too have the adventurer's instinct. I haven't any head for business. When the war ended — I had been wounded twice and transferred into the Intelligence Department — it chanced that I was in Palestine, and I went on from there to Abyssinia. From there I visited some friends in Bombay, and when I got home my father and I planned my little adventure in China."

"You certainly are some traveller," she admitted smilingly.

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"So was my father before me," he confided. "He was in the Diplomatic Service for some time, and lived in Pekin during the days of the Monarchy."

She suddenly looked around and saw the rising moon a blood-red circle emerging with incredible swiftness from the edge of a black sea. She crossed the deck swiftly, waving to him to follow her. Halfway there he paused. She was standing full in the light shining through the uncurtained window of the Marconi room; tall, slim and white in the windless night — a curiously and wonderfully desirable vision. She turned and waved to him impatiently, a smile of invitation upon her lips, her eyes full of eager delight.

"Hurry!" she cried. "Isn't it wonderful?"

He came slowly across the deck, and a little puzzled frown took the place of her smile as he drew near.

"Why do you look at me as though you had never seen me before?" she asked, as he took his place by her side.

"I never have, with the same eyes," he answered uneasily.

"Idiot!" she laughed. "Well, you'll have to put up with me for at least six weeks like this. Don't you love the stillness with just the throb of the engine?"

"I'd like it better without the engine," he observed. "It is beautiful enough here to make one believe that we are on our way to paradise, and that wretched throb keeps on reminding us that our next stop is Bombay."

"Aren't you just a little inclined to be cynical to-night?" she asked.

"I don't know quite what's the matter with me," he answered restlessly. "I think that terrible country behind has broken my nerve, or ——"

His thoughts flashed back to his stateroom. She was suddenly intent upon listening. From away upon

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the lower deck they could hear the sound of the orchestra. Her face lit up with pure joy.

"Dancing!" she cried. "I believe they're dancing. Why, I haven't even heard the music since I left New York! Come along!"

She had reached the companion ladder before he could catch her up. Already her feet were moving to the music.

"Look here," he confided doubtfully, "remember I've been out of England for a very long time. I'm not at all sure that I can manage these new steps."

She slipped her arm through his in friendly fashion.

"You're the only man on board I know, and you've got to," she declared imperiously.

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CHAPTER VI

"PERKINS," Gregory demanded, as he struggled into his dinner coat a few nights later, "what should you think if I told you to drop that grinning piece of wooden monstrosity there into the sea?"

The steward glanced doubtfully over his shoulder at the Image.

"It's a damned ugly piece of goods, sir," he admitted, "but I shouldn't make away with it like that. It's very likely valuable. They give no end of money sometimes for genuine bits of stuff from China way."

Gregory straightened his tie and looked at his treasure fixedly.

"Perkins," he confided, "that Image is either worth a few hundred, or perhaps a thousand pounds as an antique, or it may be worth — listen to me — a million."

The steward coughed. He was inclined to think that this passenger of his, on whom the slackness of the season had enabled him to bestow more than his normal share of attention, was a trifle cracked.

"If it is worth as much money as that, sir," he remarked, "it would be a sin to think of getting rid of it."

"You're quite right," Gregory assented, "it would be a sin. We'll let it stay where it is."

At his table in the dining saloon he trifled with his dinner and covertly watched the girl seated by the captain's side, who, on his entrance, had sent him a little wave of welcome. He had worshipped more or less casually at the shrine of girls and women of all ages, but never with quite the same restless and fitful confusion of feeling as had swept over him occasionally

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during the last few days in her near presence, or at the thought of her in his sleepless hours. She was, he tried to tell himself, as he studied her with eyes that attempted to be critical, an ordinary, pleasant-looking, good-looking, attractive girl, like hundreds of others of her age, too young and too lacking in experience to justify a great passion. Her yellow hair, her one real beauty, was brushed backwards with a touch almost of severity; a fashion, however, which the vivacity of her face justified. Her eyes, he had to admit, were unusual; grave and tender sometimes, full of the sparkle of humour when, as now, she was engaged in light-hearted conversation. Her mouth was perhaps almost too sensitive, but it was beautifully shaped, and not over-small. He watched her rise and walk out of the saloon; a girl's figure still, but with just a suggestion of coming power in her easy, flowing movements.

He had known more beautiful women. There were more beautiful women to be seen every day in Bond Street, he told himself, with an almost fierce desire to deny her attractiveness, but she possessed a gift which baffled him. He only knew that the idea of that message, which without a doubt she must at some time or other receive from her uncle, was like a nightmare to him. He felt instinctively how meanness of any sort, dishonour and falsehood, would appeal to her, with her youthful, uncompromising standards, her lack of experience. She would belie that sensitive mouth and the kindliness of her eyes. Where an older woman might have sympathised she would have no pity. And with it all his mind was in a state of turmoil about her. Unaccustomed sensations tortured him. The flash of her welcoming glance had set his pulses tingling.

He finished his wine, leaving most of his dinner untasted, and, instead of going on deck, returned to his

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stateroom, thrust aside the curtain, and looked fiercely, almost challengingly, at his treasure. As he looked he felt once more a certain change in himself and his impulses, suddenly felt the torture of a sacrilegious thought, an instinct, horrible at one moment, alluring the next. He suddenly threw the cigarette case which he was holding at the face which mocked him.

"Blast you!" he cried.

The case, truly enough thrown, recoiled from the unchanging hardness of that lowering forehead, and fell, spilling its contents upon the bunk. He recovered it with trembling fingers, listening all the time to the music of the distant orchestra. He had a sudden impulse to lock the door and stay where he was; an impulse swept away a moment later by an unconquerable desire to be moving to the music with Claire in his arms. From the door he ventured upon one last unwilling glance upwards. He could have sworn that for the fiftieth time that expression had changed. There was a light almost of suggestion in those sightless orbs, a curl of sardonic contempt in the thick lips. He hurried up on to the deck and leaned for a moment over the rail, his eyes looking across the sea.

"Nerves!" he told himself slowly. "Nerves!"

The doctor passed him with a cheery good evening. Gregory called out to him.

"Just a moment, Doctor."

"You'll be in disgrace," the latter remarked. "They're dancing already. Come and have a liqueur in my room first."

"Thank you," Gregory replied.

They made their way to the lower deck and into the doctor's quarters. The latter excused himself for a moment whilst he prepared some medicine. Afterwards he opened his cupboard, produced a bottle of brandy

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and two liqueur glasses and pushed a box of cigarettes across the table.

"What's wrong with you, young fellow?" he asked a little abruptly.

"Nerves," Gregory answered. "Do you believe in them?"

"To some extent," was the cautious reply. "How are they getting at you?"

"I'm haunted by an evil spirit," Gregory declared, lighting a cigarette. "It's there, a wooden Image behind a curtain, down in my stateroom. Now get ready to laugh. I assure you, Doctor, every moment I spend with that damned thing makes me feel more of a rotter."

"Where did you get it?" the doctor enquired curiously.

Gregory glanced towards the closed door.

"I am not sure whether it is wise to tell you," he replied, "but, as a matter of fact, it is a small statue of a famous Chinese god. It is meant to represent all the gross side of a man's life. It is meant to depict every evil that can haunt the sinner."

The doctor suddenly leaned forward in his chair.

"You don't mean to tell me that you were mixed up in the Nilkaya affair?" he exclaimed. "You're not one of the Englishmen who looted the place?"

"I've got one of the Images here, anyway," Gregory admitted.

"There was a report that you were both dead."

"My pal is, although he was taking on what we thought the simplest part of the job. They got me, a dozen of those priests. Fought like furies, the fellows did! I was to have been food for the alligators but I was rescued on the river by a trader from the coast."

The doctor looked at his companion with amazement.

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"No wonder you've got nerves," he observed. "You've been through something."

"I've been through hell," Gregory admitted. "The fight wasn't so bad, but I was two days strapped up on that pirate ship with not a mouthful to eat, in a foul atmosphere, and expecting to be thrown overboard at any moment. I had a certain amount of luck. I got clear, as you see, and I've got one of the Images. It is supposed to be chock full of jewels, and yet I'm half inclined to chuck the damned thing overboard."

The doctor smiled reassuringly.

"I won't say anything of the morality of the enterprise," he declared, "but you had a fine, plucky adventure, and when you talk about throwing the Image overboard, you're talking like an ass. Set your heel upon all this superstitious nonsense, Ballaston, and go on as usual. Believe me, you'll be none the worse for possessing that piece of wood. You create the evil in yourself when you allow yourself to believe that the thing's likely to do you harm. The world's old enough for us to realise the nature of most of its organic forces. The malice of nine hundred years ago may have been carved into that Image, but it can't come out again."

Gregory drew a little sigh of relief.

"Of course you're right," he acquiesced, "and yet ——"

"Cut out the 'and yets'," the doctor interrupted. "Get up on deck now and dance. That's what's good for you. Be normal and don't harbour any thought that hasn't a definite and reasonable origin. See you later. I may come up and have a turn myself."

Gregory hurried on deck to be greeted a little reproachfully by Claire.

"How dare you keep me waiting," she complained. "The orchestra have never played better and I've been

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nearly crazy sitting here by myself. Don't let's waste a minute now you have come."

They were out of the region of storms. The awning had been rolled away and they danced on the outside deck with the orchestra half concealed in a little lounge. The minutes passed by in a sort of enchantment. From fox trots they passed to waltzes, both utterly unconscious that sometimes they were the only two dancing. Suddenly Claire drew back and looked at her companion.

"Why, I believe you're tired!" she exclaimed. "Do let's stop."

"No, we'll go on," he answered quickly.

The music seemed to have gained a new and more passionate throb. The starlit night seemed to be leaning down, to close them in. There was a breath of magic in the languid air, in the perfume from her hair and clothes, swimming out into the stillness. Her eyes for a moment had half closed in faint response to the joy of it all. His arm suddenly tightened around her — tightened!

"Stop!" she ordered quickly.

He obeyed at once. She looked at him with an expression of amazement, in which was almost a gleam of terror. Then she turned away.

"I'm tired," she said. "I want to speak to Mrs. Hichens. Please don't come."

He knew better than to follow her, to protest, to attempt any explanation. He made his way to the smoking room and drank two whiskies and sodas. The steward looked at him curiously.

"Hot work dancing to-night, sir," he observed.

"Hot as hell," Gregory answered. "Give me another drink."

He was served immediately. Afterwards he stepped back on to the deck. Claire had disappeared. He

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went up to a woman whom he had previously avoided with sedulous care — a grass widow, good-looking still in a way, but overanxious, overobvious, overperfumed. She rose to her feet with astonishing alacrity at his unexpected invitation. A moment later they danced off into the darkness.

The smoking-room steward took Gregory to his stateroom that night, and the faithful Perkins, summoned from his own repose, undressed him. He went to sleep with a chuckle upon his distorted lips.

"I'm with you, old fellow," he muttered, waving his hand feebly to his unseen companion. "You're the chap for us Ballastons. Glad I got you — and not the other."

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CHAPTER VII

THE doctor, a few days later, paused in his morning promenade and took a vacant place by Claire's side. He made a few commonplace remarks about the voyage, and then leaned confidentially towards her.

"Miss Endacott, I want to speak to you for a moment, if I may, about young Ballaston."

The sensitive lips quivered a little. Nevertheless she had self-control.

"Well, Doctor?"

"I don't exactly know what has happened, of course," he went on, "but you two were such pals at first, and now one can't help noticing that you scarcely speak. Ballaston hasn't said a word to me. This is all on my own, but I imagine that somehow or other, he has succeeded in offending you."

"He has," she acquiesced coldly.

"I don't hold any brief for the young man," the doctor proceeded, "but I can't help wondering whether you know what he's been through just lately. He's had a wonderful adventure and played his part like a man. I won't say a word about the morality of it, or the object of it, or anything else. I'll only say that it was a jolly plucky thing to attempt and he only escaped with his life by a miracle."

"I have heard all this," Claire admitted.

"It is always after an exploit of this sort that one runs a danger of suffering from nerves. That's precisely what's happened to young Ballaston. In his stateroom down below he has that Image which he risked his life for, and he's adopted the legend about it in a way I should never have dreamed a young fellow with

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his strength of character could have done. You know the legend?"

"I have heard it."

"Well, Ballaston honestly believes that every hour he spends with this Image is doing him harm morally and that very belief is apt to make him behave at odd times impossibly. The thing won't last, of course. He'll get used to it, and the idea will pass out of his brain. It is there just now, and I tell you frankly that I believe it is likely to influence his actions."

There was more and more interest in Claire's face, a little tinge of returning colour. She leaned forward. The icy note had gone from her tone.

"How extraordinary!" she exclaimed. "I — well, to tell you the truth, Doctor, the other night when we were dancing, when I was offended, I thought that he had had too much to drink."

The doctor shook his head.

"It wasn't that at all," he assured her gravely. "Now, mind you, Miss Endacott, I'm not defending Ballaston. I don't even know what the cause of offence was — certainly I'm not trying to interfere in any way — but he is suffering, and suffering terribly, and it isn't doing him any good to be cut off from you. If you could just remember that, you might be able to help him, perhaps more than any one else."

"I will remember," she promised. "Thank you very much indeed."

The doctor took his leave and Claire sat gazing out to sea with a kindlier expression in her face. A few minutes later, Gregory left the smoking room, and, seeing her, was turning the other way. She called to him softly.

"Mr. Ballaston."

He glanced around in surprise.

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"Mr. Ballaston, please come here for a moment."

He approached slowly and stood before her, bareheaded. As she looked at him her pity increased. His eyes were very brilliant but they seemed to have sunken, and he was certainly thinner in the face.

"Will you sit down and talk to me for a little time, please," she invited.

"If you wish me to," he replied diffidently.

"I think that perhaps I was silly about the other night," she went on. "I perhaps — misunderstood."

"You didn't," he groaned.

"Please don't say that," she begged. "I want to believe that I did, and I want you to please be nice to me again and be different."

"Has any one been talking to you?" he asked.

"The doctor spoke a few words," she admitted.

"It is sweet of you," he declared dejectedly, "but you mustn't believe the doctor altogether. It isn't exactly nerves. I was never much good and you're such a child. I'm not good enough now to talk and dance with you on equal terms. I feel this all the time. For two days I have hated you because it is through you I know what I am. And I don't mind telling you that I hate you," he went on, "because ——"

"Because?" she questioned.

"Because I care for you more than any one else in the world," he concluded.

She laughed, but very kindly. Her eyes were softer than he had ever seen them, and there was a new flush in her cheeks.

"It is just as silly for you to say that as the other," she declared, "considering that I have known you exactly — what is it? — eleven, twelve days. Now, could we talk nonsense, please, or go for a walk. We start again, and you see — I trust you."

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"I shouldn't," he warned her gloomily. "I'm not trustworthy, and you'll find it out before long."

"I'll wait until I do," she decided. "Come along. This morning I need movement. It isn't nearly so hot, and there hasn't been any one to do things with the last few days. We'll play deck tennis on the upper deck, and then go for a swim."

They passed the whole morning together. The doctor, seeing them, waved his hand cordially. The captain stopped and exchanged a few good-humoured words. Everything seemed to be once more as it should be. Gregory was quite as distinctly the best-looking and most attractive young man on board as Claire was the most charming girl, and nearly every one seemed pleased that the little misunderstanding which had kept them apart was apparently removed. Gossip, not ill-natured, but natural enough, recommenced. Gregory, heir to a baronetcy, poor, perhaps, but with a romantic career for a young man, and Claire, whose uncle was a partner in the great firm of Johnson and Company — a most suitable affair. Late in the afternoon they found a cool corner in the bows, and Gregory read poetry. His voice, naturally a beautiful one, with its slight Oxford peculiarities, fascinated Claire. She listened with joy as he passed from Shelley to Keats and wound up with Swinburne. Afterwards the captain took them into his room for tea and they sat talking until it was almost time to change. They descended from the bridge together.

"To-night," Claire exclaimed happily, "we dance."

Gregory made no reply. For a single moment a little shiver seemed to pass through him. She turned and smiled reassuringly.

"I am looking forward to it so much," she murmured. "I'm sure we are both going to love it."

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The doctor swung by as Gregory was changing for dinner. Gregory hailed him.

"Just one moment," he called out.

The doctor paused and put his head in the state-room — a large one on the upper promenade deck and easily accessible.

"I want to thank you," Gregory said earnestly, "for speaking to Miss Endacott."

"Everything all right again?" the other asked, smiling.

"Quite, thanks to you," was the well-satisfied reply. "I hope to God I don't give myself away again! Come in and have a look at my evil genius."

The doctor came a little farther into the room and examined the Image through his eyeglasses.

"Jove, it's amazing," he exclaimed; "amazingly powerful!"

"Diabolically!" Gregory muttered.

The doctor was clearly fascinated by the Image. His fingers passed over it with the soft touch of a *connoisseur*. He stood back and viewed it from another angle.

"Ballaston," he said, "there isn't a sculptor in the West to-day who could produce a piece of work like that. It's stupendous!"

"I think I shall tell my steward to send it down below into safe keeping, somewhere," Gregory suggested, turning away and lighting a cigarette. "Don't you think it would be a good idea?"

The doctor shook his head.

"I think it would be a damned bad idea," he answered. "Now, look here, young fellow," he went on, putting his hand on Gregory's shoulder, "how old are you?"

"Thirty-one."

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"If at your time of life," the doctor continued, "you once begin to give way to what your brain and real consciousness tell you is an idea, you'll be a victim to what they call 'nerves' all your life. You've never been affected before like this, have you?"

"Never," Gregory declared earnestly. "One doesn't want to talk about oneself, but I got my medals in France, and a jolly close shave of the big thing. I've shot big game and I've come out of tight corners once or twice without turning a hair. That's why I don't understand this."

"Good!" the doctor exclaimed. "That confirms me in what I was saying. Square up to it, man! Don't be all the time flinching away, like you are now. Look at it. Look at it with me, arm in arm. It is just a damned but wonderful representation of wickedness. There is nothing alive about it, except its art. It isn't going to do you any harm, and it isn't going to do me any harm. Let it stay where it is."

Ballaston fastened his tie slowly, considering the advice thoughtfully.

"You mean that, Doctor?" he demanded. "You see, when I'm sane, I have the utmost respect and — I can say it to you — affection for Miss Endacott. She's only a child, of course, but she's wonderful. It's such a horrible thought that I might ——"

"Chuck it!" the doctor interrupted tersely. "You won't. Remember, if you give way now you will give way all your life. Come in and have a last drink with me before you turn in to-night and I bet you'll be jolly glad you've stuck it out. — I must get along now. Got a patient expecting me before dinner."

He swung off, large, buoyant, diffusing an atmosphere of confidence. Gregory finished his dressing, strolled along the deck, and found Mrs. Hichens and Claire.

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He took them all into the little lounge where they drank cocktails together. Gregory was suddenly in joyous spirits, and Claire thoroughly responsive. They made plans for the next few days and ended up with a race round the deck, the course being kept clear by a little handful of amused passengers. The captain, coming upon them, breathless, just as the bugle sounded, invited Gregory to his table for dinner, and Gregory, his unsociability altogether dispersed, proved a most attractive guest. Of his own exploits he tried to talk as little as possible, but the Ballastons had been a family well known in sporting and political circles for generations, and there were plenty of anecdotes to be told of English life for Claire's amusement. A general engaged him in kindly reminiscences of France, and he found an old Etonian, and a junior diplomat on his way home from Japan. They sat at table until long after the others had left, and the music had already commenced when they trooped up the gangway.

"What a wonderful evening!" Claire exclaimed delightedly. "And now we are going to dance!"

The orchestra welcomed them back again with kindly smiles. The lanterns which enclosed the little space of deck were like fairy lights. The music streamed out to them, even its ordinary melodies somehow beautified by their own sense of well-being and the glamour of their surroundings. Claire danced from pure love of graceful movement, from that age-long impulse of rhythm which passes behind history into legend; Gregory, a born athlete and light-footed as an Indian, suffering nothing from his ignorance of the more modern steps. Once or twice they rested, but always impatiently, always with their senses tingling with the joy of rhythmical motion. It was not until the end of the programme that Claire realised suddenly that her companion had been dancing

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during the last few minutes with unusual stiffness. He was pale and breathing more quickly than usual.

"How selfish of me!" she exclaimed. "Of course you are tired! Let us sit out for a few minutes — somewhere where the music doesn't haunt us."

They found two chairs in a retired corner. Gregory seemed to have thrown off his reserves, to have become once more fluent and discoursive. His voice, lowered because of occasional promenaders, had developed an almost passionate *timbre*. There was a light in his eyes which half puzzled, half thrilled her. His hands sought her fingers underneath the rug which they shared. She suffered him to hold them for a moment before she drew them gently away.

"I have never forgotten," he told her, "how I saw you first. You came into that crazy old warehouse with its piles of silks and rugs and carpets, and shelves of jade and china, and its quaint odour, the perfume of China and the East. You threaded your way through that group of Chinamen in that spotless white dress of yours, in the hat with the yellow flowers, like something fresh and sweet from a new world — from a world where the sun didn't bake and shrivel everything to dust, or those dank, humid mists make slime of the ground underneath."

She laughed softly.

"I think the poetry of this afternoon is lingering in your brain," she said. "Still, I dare say it was strange to see an American girl with a New York frock amongst all that medley. You must have thought our little house stranger yet. Can you imagine my uncle, surrounded with all those beautiful things, living between bare walls and with oil-cloth upon the floor, and — am I very greedy — with such a terrible cook? Are you shocked at me for my materialism? You know I never

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pretended to be anything else. I love life as it comes to me day by day, with just the things it brings."

"And I love life as I find it now," he whispered. "It seems too wonderful to think that you too are on your way to England, and that we're going to be almost neighbours."

"But you are never at home," she reminded him, with a smile.

"I've had nothing to keep me at home," he rejoined. "In the future it may be different. Already I begin to feel that my love of wandering is finished."

"Perhaps," she suggested softly, "we had better dance."

She rose to her feet and he acquiesced at once. As he leaned towards her, his face as white as marble in the moonlight, he was undoubtedly handsome, yet once again she caught a glimpse of something in his eyes which filled her with a vague uneasiness.

"Yes, we'll dance," he assented. "You're teaching me to understand what dancing means. The last time — when was it? — Alexandria, I believe ——"

He stopped abruptly, confused by a turbulent flood of memory. They moved away to the music, in and out of the string of lights, rocking now in an unexpected night breeze. Claire danced still with the joy of her youthful strength and gracious temperament. Once or twice, when Gregory's arm seemed to be drawing her a little closer, she freed herself slightly. Once she caught a flash of that disturbing glint in his eyes, but she only laughed at her own uneasiness.

"Please don't look so terribly in earnest," she begged him. "Dancing is one of the happiest things in the world. We must keep that feeling always with us."

The music came to an abrupt finish. Claire looked across at the leader of the orchestra in dismay, but it

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was too late for intervention. Already the first notes of "God Save the King" had been struck.

"Well, it has been lovely," she declared. "I suppose I must go and look for Mrs. Hichens."

"Come and have a lemon squash first," he begged.

The steward served them out on deck. Gregory drank a whisky and soda as though it had been water.

"Let's sit out for a time," he suggested. "It is too warm to sleep down below. I'll fetch some more rugs."

She shook her head and rose regretfully to her feet.

"It has been delightful," she admitted, "but after all it is eleven o'clock."

They strolled along the deck. Suddenly he gripped her by the arm. They were passing his stateroom. Perkins was moving about and the light was lit. He pointed in through the wide-open door, only a few feet away.

"Let me show you my evil genius," he begged.

She hesitated for a moment. Then, with the steward smilingly standing on one side for her to enter, her hesitation seemed ridiculous. She crossed the threshold as Perkins disappeared with a suave good night. Gregory stood by her side and pointed to the Image. She gave a little gasp. For several moments neither of them spoke. They both gazed at it intently; Claire with wondering horror; Gregory fighting against some sympathetic suggestion in the cynical brutality of the thick mocking lips.

"What a ghastly thing to own," she cried.

The hand which had been holding her arm was suddenly round her waist.

"Look at it by moonlight," he whispered in her ear.

The forefinger of his other hand touched the switch. They were almost in darkness. His eyes suddenly seemed to be blazing into hers. She felt the burning of

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his lips even as they drew near. There was something sweet but vaguely evil in his tone.

"Claire, you are adorable!"

She wrenched herself free — free from arms which had seemed to be closing like a vice round her, away from lips whose very proximity seemed to scorch. She staggered through the door. As she stood there on the deck, the light flashed out again, and Gregory, suddenly, it seemed, almost calm, stood upon the threshold, a courteous but sardonic farewell upon his lips.

"Good night," he said. "You realise now, perhaps, what it is for a man to live with so evil a thing."

She swayed as she neared the companionway and steadied herself in her descent by the banisters. When she reached her room she locked the door behind her and threw herself upon the bed. — Gregory had moved back into his stateroom. His fist, hard and clenched, was within a few inches of the leering mouth.

"You damned swine!" he exclaimed, with all his calmness gone, a hoarse fury breaking his voice. "You — you accursed spirit!"

His voice suddenly failed. An overpowering impulse seized him. He took the Image into his arms, rushed through the open door across the deck, and leaned over the rail.

"Find your own hell!" he shouted, and dashed it downwards.

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CHAPTER VIII

In the morning Gregory awoke after a wonderfully sound sleep. It was still very early. There was a delightful pearly light in the sky, visible through his open porthole. The glitter of the barely risen sun lay faint upon the ocean. He remained for a few minutes, breathing quietly, trying to recall the events of the night before. They came back to him with a shock, followed by an immense sense of relief. He remembered what he had done without a thought of regret. He had cast away the fruits of his enterprise, the possibility of wealth, and he was full of rejoicing. In those few seconds of glad thought, the world seemed a different place, wealth, after all, but a trifling part of its joys, youth and love suddenly great and wonderful things. A clearer light seemed to be pouring in upon some possible future, a new atmosphere of happiness encircling him. He sprang out of bed. He would have an early bath and send a note round to Claire. She must forgive. She must understand. She must realise the sacrifice he had made. Then, as he reached for his dressing gown, he felt as though he were turned to stone. Up on its accustomed place, its eyes meeting his, its lips mocking him, was the Image. He stood looking at it, for once genuinely terrified. Then he pressed the bell feverishly, and stood there with his thumb upon the knob until Perkins came running in.

"Where the hell did that come from?" he demanded, pointing to the Image.

Perkins smiled with the air of one who imparts good tidings.

"'The bos'un sent it up early this morning, sir," he

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explained. "It was in one of the lower boats, swung out from the main deck — gone right through the canvas but there isn't a scratch on it."

Gregory drew on his dressing gown and staggered out on to the deck. He walked up and down for an hour and a half, fighting a distinct and definite battle, and with every step he took it seemed to him that he became saner. His waking idea took shape, gave him encouragement and life. With his craving for what it might have to give abandoned, the power of the Image, too, for evil, must decline. He wanted those jewels no longer. He was ready to face life and all its possibilities from a new standard. He went down to his bath, visited the barber, and dressed before any of the passengers were astir. Then he made his way into the writing room and drew paper and ink towards him. He wrote fluently, and without hesitation. All that he wished to say seemed so clear:

These few lines, dear, bring my prayer to you for pardon. The doctor talks of nerves. Well, I never suffered from them, and I would as soon believe in the supernatural. I believe that there is evil in my treasure. Last night, in a fit of self-disgust, I tried to throw it overboard, but it was caught by one of the canvas-covered boats on the lower deck and when I awoke this morning it was back in its accustomed place. If your answer to this note is what I pray for, it will be overboard before we meet, and overboard in such a place that it will sink to the bottom of the sea.

Will you marry me, Claire, as soon as we reach England, and my father and your uncle can meet and give their consent? I don't pretend that I am a particularly desirable person, but I am, at any rate, not too bad to realise that you are the dearest and sweetest thing I have ever met, or to fail in keeping my word when I

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promise that you shall never regret it if you say "yes." I haven't a great deal to offer you, beyond my love, but that I offer to you, not in the spirit of last night in the shadow of that accursed Image, but earnestly, and faithfully, and eternally.

Please send me just a line. The black Buddha waits to know his fate, and I mine.

GREGORY.

Perkins took the note, and after his departure Gregory climbed to the upper deck and stood there leaning over the rail, forgetting even to smoke, watching the sun mount a little higher and spread its gleams a little farther across the ocean, watching the blue haze of coming heat blot out the clearness of the horizon, waiting with an eagerness utterly unfamiliar, with a sense of having suddenly changed personalities with some simpler and stronger being. At last the head and shoulders of Perkins appeared, coming up the ladder.

"Your breakfast is in your room, sir," he announced, as he handed over the note he was carrying.

Gregory made no reply. He was looking at the handwriting upon the envelope; rather faint and delicate, not too legible. For a moment or two he turned the note over. He absolutely feared to open it. A wave of pessimism had seized him. Then he suddenly tore the envelope across and read:

DEAR MR. BALLASTON,

I am so sorry but I cannot say "yes." I appreciate your letter and I try to sympathise with what lies behind it, but, to be quite honest, I cannot just now believe in you. I do not myself believe in the supernatural, nor can I bring myself to believe in the superstition of which you speak. I can, therefore, only think

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of you as one whom I was beginning to like very much indeed, but who has disappointed me bitterly.

I am sorry, but that is how I feel, and it is useless for me to pretend otherwise. If you wish to be kind, please keep away. It is foolish, of course, but you see I am a little lonely here, and, after what has happened, I shall feel so much happier not to find myself alone with you again.

CLAIRE ENDACOTT.

Gregory read the letter twice, then sent it fluttering away in little white fragments, watching them fall like snowflakes upon the sea. Afterwards he descended to his stateroom. He sat on his camp stool, stirred his coffee, and looked across at the Image. Then, with his left hand, he kissed his fingers to it.

"I give you best, my friend," he groaned. "Count me your disciple."

Gregory was on deck even before his accustomed time. He showed unusual interest in the ship's run and greeted Claire, when she appeared very late and looking pale and tired, with the casualness of a steamer acquaintance. He talked lightly with Mrs. Hichens, exchanged remarks with his other fellow passengers, and, notwithstanding the slight air of aloofness which was habitual to him, he took a prominent part in the sports of the day. He conducted an auction pool with success and he refused no man's invitation to drink. At night, though, when the dancing started, he obstinately refused to leave the smoking room, pleaded a weak ankle and confessed to an inordinate thirst. The doctor came in and sat beside him.

"More trouble?" he asked quietly.

Gregory shrugged his shoulders.

"No particular trouble," he replied. "I'm rather

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fed up with dancing, besides which I have worn through the soles of my only pair of patent shoes."

"Is Miss Endacott in a similar predicament?" the doctor enquired. "I see that she is not on deck."

"Miss Endacott is probably reading one of Paley's sermons to Mrs. Hichens," he answered a little sarcastically. "I wonder why the devil some one doesn't look after your libraries on board ship, Doctor. There are no less than eleven different volumes of sermons there. No doubt you got them cheap, but who wants them, especially on a voyage where one is supposed to send one's morals overland."

The doctor rose to his feet.

"There is nothing I can do for you?" he asked.

"Nothing," Gregory replied. "Have a drink."

The doctor shook his head.

"I am in earnest," he persisted. "I am still at your disposal. If you want a sleeping draught, I'm your man, or an ambassador — well, I'm here. Otherwise ——"

"It happens to be otherwise," Gregory declared, a little brutally.

"Perkins," Gregory Ballaston asked, sitting up in his bunk a few mornings later, and gazing distastefully at his tea, "was I very drunk last night?"

"No more than usual, sir," was the man's somewhat gloomy answer. "The chief steward in the second class sent for me and I brought you up myself."

Gregory sighed.

"Bad, Perkins — bad!" he admitted. "I ought not to have gone there at all. Was I — er — misbehaving more than usual?"

"You seemed to be making a little free with the young women down there, if I might say so, sir," Perkins replied.

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Gregory poured himself out some tea.

"Well, it was the last night, anyhow," he said, with an air of relief. "I am landing at Marseilles."

"I have packed most of your things, sir," the man announced. "I expect they'll bustle the overland passengers off the ship as quickly as possible. We're a good many hours late as it is, and the train will be waiting."

"I am going the other way," Gregory confided. "I have a strange feeling, Perkins, that I am likely to win at Monte Carlo. I have been there twice before and lost pretty well all I possessed at the moment. This time I feel like winning. Anyway, I am going to try my luck."

"When shall I be able to finish your packing, sir?"

"Whenever you like and as soon as you like. I don't care for this ship, Perkins. You're a good fellow and you've looked after me very well, but I don't like the rest of them any more than they like me. You wouldn't say that I was a popular person on board, would you, Perkins?"

The man made no reply for a moment. He was occupied thrusting the trees into some evening slippers.

"If I might make so bold, sir," he said at last, "you have only yourself to thank for what people think. You have acted queerly more than once, sir."

"A fact," Gregory murmured; "a damnable fact!"

"And I don't hold," the man went on, "with this sitting in the smoking room, taking a drink with anybody who comes along, and going down to the second class, when there's plenty of your own sort on board, sir."

"You're a sound fellow, Perkins," Gregory admitted, as he swung out of his bunk. "Is my bath ready?"

"Waiting, sir."

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"And, Perkins," Gregory continued, as he struggled into his dressing gown, "some time this morning I want you to bring me some packing cloth and get the carpenter to find you a box. I can't take my Image about like that. I'm going to send it home to my father — a little souvenir of my visit to China. I think it might brighten up the household."

"I'll fetch you the packing cloth and box, sir, with pleasure," Perkins assented, looking up at the Image dubiously, "but if it belonged to me I know what I should do with it."

Gregory paused enquiringly. The steward was still looking over the rail of the bunk with an expression of disgust.

"I should chuck it overboard and have done with it, sir."

"But it is valuable," Gregory expostulated, swinging his towel; "worth a lot of money, Perkins. No one knows quite how much but it's worth a great deal of money."

"'Tain't for its looks, anyway," the man muttered.

Gregory went through his usual morning routine — his bath, the swim, the gymnasium and the coiffeur. Afterwards he made a leisurely toilet in his stateroom, slipped out on to the deck at a moment when it was almost deserted, and walked across to the smoking room with swift footsteps, lithe and graceful, notwithstanding the debauch of the night before, carefully dressed as usual, his eyes as bright as ever, no sign of evil living in his clear complexion. Yet, for all his presentability, no one knew better than he that he had gradually become the most unpopular person upon the ship. The captain had taken to looking the other way when he passed. The doctor's nod was of the curtest. Mrs. Hichens never pretended not to cut him. Claire alone, on the

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few occasions when they passed or met face to face, bowed gravely, sometimes even exchanged a word of greeting. She still spent the time on deck as usual, but always with Mrs. Hichens by her side. One or two of the women with whom he had exchanged a few civilities still looked wistfully for him when the dancing began — his grass widow had indeed boldly attempted to waylay him one evening on his return from the dining saloon. Gregory, however, lied with cynical impudence, declared that he had sprained his ankle and would not dance again for the rest of the voyage, and then promptly walked alone for an hour through the summer darkness on the upper deck. On another occasion an enterprising young woman, whose courage was greater than her discretion, sought him out in the smoking room and tried to gain his confidence. She rejoined her friends after a very brief absence, a little ruffled. Gregory's politeness was icy, but on one point he seemed to have made up his mind: He was ready to gamble with any one, to drink with any one, but so far as the women were concerned — the women of his own quarter of the ship — he avoided them with a finality which admitted of no advances. He played cards all through the long summer days and moonlit, Mediterranean nights, for stakes much higher than the ship's officers approved of, but he never approached the dancing spaces or entered the music room where the ladies congregated. Rumour went about that he had been sent to Coventry, and, as was natural, on an Eastern liner, there were no end of scandalous stories. One of them, and a name, he happened to overhear, and he gave the smoking room something to gossip about for the rest of the day. He rose from his seat and approached the little group.

"May I ask your name, sir?" he enquired of the

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man who had told the story; a large man, well under medium age, but puffy and loud-voiced.

"Why, you surely may," was the prompt reply. "Richard Thomson. We've played cards together more than once."

"Well, Mr. Thomson," Gregory said, "I have to tell you that I dislike the mention of ladies' names in a smoking room. I dislike it so much, especially when allied with scandalous fiction, that I am going to throw you out on to the deck."

The man tried bluster, but he fared the worse for it. He picked himself up, sprawling, from somewhere near the rails, and spent his morning trying to interview various officers of the ship. The purser at last was commissioned to approach Gregory.

"I have a complaint, Mr. Ballaston," he announced, a little stiffly, "from Mr. Thomson. He asserts that you used violence to him in the smoking room."

"Quite correct," was the deliberate reply. "I don't like him. I shall probably throw him out again if he comes in."

"An affair of this sort is not to be treated so lightly, sir," the purser declared. "I must request some sort of an explanation or else that you apologise to Mr. Thomson."

Gregory considered for a moment.

"Very well," he said, "I will offer you this much of an explanation. I heard Mr. Thomson make use of the name of a young lady in the smoking room. He coupled her name with a story, which, although it may not have reflected any positive discredit upon her, was yet untrue. I object to the use of ladies' names in a smoking room, and I did what I should have done at any time in my life, and what I should do again this afternoon and again to-morrow if necessary — I threw him out. As

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to apologising to him — I will fight him with one hand or standing on one leg, or I will shoot at him and let him shoot at me from any mark he likes, or give him what is termed 'satisfaction', in any such manner as he can suggest, but sooner than apologise I would throw him overboard first and spend the rest of the voyage in irons myself if necessary."

The purser's face relaxed.

"I will report your explanation to the captain, Mr. Ballaston," he promised.

Nothing more was heard of the matter. Thomson somewhat ostentatiously played bridge out on deck with his friends, and Gregory, suddenly sick of his smoking-room companions, invaded the ship's library and abjured cards. He drew a great sigh of relief when at last, amidst the screaming of tugs and a strange silence in the engine room, they were brought in to Marseilles docks. He lingered about for an hour after the gangways were down, hoping to be the last to leave the ship. In the customs shed, however, when he made his belated appearance there, he came face to face with Claire and Mrs. Hichens. The latter ignored him; Claire held out her hand.

"Good-by, Mr. Ballaston," she said.

Gregory was taken aback. He could not refuse her hand, but he could find no words. Mrs. Hichens walked on. They were for a moment alone together.

"I am very sorry," she continued, "that I had to answer your letter as I felt. I am trying to forget all that is disagreeable in our friendship, and remember only how thoroughly we enjoyed the first part of the voyage. Will you please do the same — and good-by!"

She was gone with a friendly little nod before he could gasp out any more than a muttered monosyllable. For a moment he almost followed her. Then he realised

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a certain finality about that gesture and turned away. Before he had finished with the customs the Paris train had left. He stood for a while at the barrier, looking after it almost wistfully, his thoughts travelling homeward. It was late spring now. There would be a scent of violets in the air, cowslips coming up in the meadows, honeysuckle in the hedges, and sweeter than anything, the wild roses making their faint appearance. He thought of the rambling, stately gardens at the Hall, the odour of the late hyacinths, the warmth of the sun on the day when the gardeners opened the potting sheds and brought out the geraniums. He could hear the lazy humming of the mowing machines, the soft splash of water from the fountain on one of the terraced lawns. It was a very beautiful home there, waiting for him; poverty-stricken, perhaps, a little silent, a long way aloof from the throb and thrill of life, the will-o'-the-wisp of happiness which he had pursued so tirelessly, which he was in quest of again, even now. Then he had a sudden vision of Claire, and of showing her the house, the gardens, the park, the woods beyond, the peace of it, the softly flowing waters of the trout stream, the hum of insects. He had a vision of Claire too, seated at the carriage window, looking out, perhaps herself not wholly happy, perhaps even at that moment with a tear in those still tender eyes. The sweetness of her, the sweetness which he had terrified, the childishness which that accursed Image would have had him disturb! It was like a black cloud upon his mind and thoughts. Then a raucous voice in his ear:

"*Il faut vous dépêcher d'enregistrer vos bagages pour Monte Carlo, monsieur. Le Rapide arrive.*"

His fit of dreaming passed, and he came back to the world of small everyday things, went through the tiresome formality of registering his luggage, found a place

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in an empty compartment, dozed and dreamed a little more, and finally was dragged behind a screaming locomotive into the curiously unimpressive station of Monte Carlo, the hills behind glittering with lights, the long sea front curving away into Italy. He shook himself and, descending, made his way to the hotel, bathed and changed and sat down to write a few momentous lines home:

Hotel de Paris,
Monte Carlo.

MY DEAR FATHER,

I have come here from Marseilles for a few days, perhaps longer — it depends upon the luck. Meanwhile you will receive from Tilbury, soon after the ship docks, the Image we got away with. You won't like it. If I were to tell you how I loathed it you would think I was mad, but from the practical point of view everything that I heard in China confirms your story. In either this Image or the other one, which, alas, fell into the hands of a firm called Johnson and Company who have branches nearly everywhere in the East, are packed the whole of the treasures of the Yun-Tse Temple. Have an expert examine it, but don't do anything about breaking it up until I return. There are reasons against this.

I suppose everything is as usual — no money, heavier taxation, plenty of debts, and Uncle Henry denying himself even a new suit of clothes. I hope Madame progresses, and that her new doctor will be able to work the great miracle. Here is an amazing coincidence, of which you will hear more before you see me. In the last letter I wrote you I told you about my adventure on the Yun-Tse River and Wu Ling, the Chinese trader who rescued me. Well, Wu Ling is a member of the firm of Johnson and Company, the great Eastern merchants, and one of his partners is Ralph Endacott, who

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used to have a Chair at Oxford, a great Oriental scholar, and — as you perhaps know — Madame's brother. He has a very delightful niece whom I saw something of on the voyage home. He himself is winding up his affairs and coming to England shortly. They have some idea, I believe, of taking a house in Norfolk. Endacott himself is a somewhat austere person who looked upon my enterprise with a good deal of disfavour, and myself, I am afraid, with more. The niece, however, is perfectly charming.

Well, I shall be home for the summer. I got through all right without a scratch, as you know, but for the first time in my life I think I have a touch of nerves. The shadow of our elms ought to help. I'll write again as soon as I have decided when to come home.

Thanks for your last letter. I don't think you need send any money. If I want it I'll wire.

Ever yours,

GREGORY.

Gregory dined alone, receiving the warm welcome of the *maîtres d'hôtel* with whom he was acquainted, and the other supernumeraries of the great hotel. Afterwards he went across and took out his cards of admission to the Casino, flung a few counters on one of the outside tables in the "Kitchen" and, losing them, came out, called in at the office of the Sporting Club for his ticket and presently mounted the front stairs, prepared for such serious gambling as he could afford. There was something almost allegorical in the wide opening of the doors as he entered. He seemed engulfed once more into the world of pleasurable adventure. Only for the first time the whole thrill of it was wanting. The tables themselves he eyed with all his old appetite, as he counted his money and planned his campaign. His inherited love of gambling was undeniable. The green

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cloth, the patter of the cards, the call of the croupiers, the rattling of the roulette ball, each had their fascination. It was the other things of which he seemed to have suddenly tired, which somehow, in a moment of presentiment as he looked through one of the great windows towards the moon, hanging down over the harbour, he knew would never appeal to him in quite the same way again. The following morning he supplemented his letter home by a telegram:

To Sir Bertram Ballaston, Baronet, Ballaston Hall, Norfolk, England.

Don't send any money have won hundred milles very bored going Rome with Carruthers to-night shall return within a month.

GREGORY.

END OF BOOK ONE

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BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

It was in a sense a dinner of celebration at Ballaston Hall in which these four men were concerned, although, with the exception of one guest, it was a family party. At the head of the table sat Sir Bertram; thin, long and hard-jawed, with brilliant dark eyes, almost black, lips and mouth sometimes cruel, sometimes humorous, a famous spendthrift, an occasional libertine, but without a doubt a great sportsman. On his left, Gregory, an almost startling reproduction of his father, but with uncertainties in his face and expression which time as yet had not moulded. Next to him, his uncle, Henry Ballaston; a smaller man, stiff, cold, courtly and formal in speech and manner, with greater capacities for kindliness but entirely devoid of that humorous twitch to the mouth. He wore old-fashioned side whiskers. His dress waistcoat showed less than the usual amount of shirt front, and his tie was almost a stock. On the opposite side of the table sat Mr. Borroughes, the agent to the estates; a mixture of sportsman, man of affairs and sycophant, never altogether at ease with his host and, in consequence, rather overdoing the assumption of such a state. Below the little party was a vast expanse of polished but empty mahogany, for dinner had been served in the great banquetting hall where places had often been laid in the past for as many as sixty guests.

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Rawson, the butler, ponderous yet light-footed, emerged from the shadows of the apartment, carrying a second decanter of the port which they had been drinking. He placed it reverently before Sir Bertram, who lifted it first to the light, poured a little into his glass, sipped it and then passed the decanter on to his son.

"Excellent!" he pronounced. "Almost as good a bottle as the first. A wonderful bin! Henry — my dear Henry!"

His brother handed the decanter across the table to Borroughes.

"You are aware, Bertram," he said, "that two glasses of wine after dinner are all I care for."

His speech was rather like that of an old-fashioned lawyer — prim, a little clipped, extraordinarily precise. Sir Bertram sighed.

"I wonder whether there is anything in the world," he murmured, "which would ever induce Henry to diverge from a habit?"

"It is less prejudice than a partiality," the latter pronounced. "Two glasses I enjoy. More, so far as I am concerned, bring me no pleasure. I agree with you, Bertram, that it is an excellent bin. I always enjoy this wine, and I have been happier than usual in drinking it this evening, on account of our pleasure in welcoming Gregory home again."

"Tell me about our new tenants at the Great House," Gregory enquired presently, addressing Borroughes.

"Very desirable — very desirable indeed," the latter replied, delighted at the chance of entering into the conversation. "Mr. Endacott, curiously enough ——"

"Endacott!" Gregory interrupted. "Did you say Endacott?"

Gregory, whose first enquiry had been a casual one,

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had set down the glass which he had been in the act of raising to his lips and was staring at Borroughes incredulously; staring at him and yet through him, convinced in his heart, suddenly realising what had happened.

"Yes, Ralph Endacott," Borroughes continued. "Curiously enough, he belongs to an old Norfolk family, although he has lived all his life in China. Madame de Fourgenet, whom every one round here calls 'Madame', is his sister. He is a great Oriental scholar, I believe. A famous man at Oxford, in his day. Then there's his niece — Miss Claire Endacott — very good-looking girl. That's all the family. They have taken the place just as it stands, furniture and all, for three years."

"And paying the full rent, too, thank God!" Sir Bertram added. "I meant to have told you, Gregory, but we've scarcely had a minute together yet. You met the old chap in China, didn't you, and of course you travelled home as far as Marseilles with the girl."

"Mr. Endacott was a partner in the great Eastern firm of Johnson and Company, with branches at Alexandria, Tokio, and at several places in China," Mr. Borroughes went on. "I made use of his banker's references, and was given to understand that he was a man of great wealth."

"He knew to whom the property belonged before he took the house, I suppose?" Gregory enquired.

"Naturally," the agent replied. "It was his sister who wrote to him about it."

"Quite a remarkable coincidence your having come across him in China," Sir Bertram observed, moving the decanter once more towards his son. "I wonder if he knows anything about your new possession, Gregory?"

"He knows more about it," was the somewhat grim response, "than any other man breathing. His firm,

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as a matter of fact, bought the twin Image from one of the robbers who held up and looted the train from Pekin."

"A small world indeed," Sir Bertram murmured. "Tell us more about your coming into touch with these people Johnson and Company. I am interested."

Gregory glanced into the shadows. Rawson was out of sight at a huge sideboard only dimly visible at the other end of the room, and the footmen had already departed.

"Well, I've told you, haven't I, the story of my rescue on the river by Wu Ling?" Gregory proceeded. "It seems this fellow is one of the firm and does all the native trading for Johnson and Company. Naturally I called upon him before I sailed and found him in their warehouse — the most astonishing place! I told him of what had happened to poor Hammonde and that only one of the Images had turned up. He listened to my story without a smile or a single word. Then he took me into a sort of holy of holies the firm had — a secret treasure house at the back of the warehouse, filled with a marvellous collection of curios — turned on the electric light — what an amazing anachronism it seemed! — and there, smiling at me, was the other Image we looted from the temple, and which had been stolen from the train — the one they called the Soul."

"My ethical sense," Sir Bertram observed, "in the question of 'meum and tuum', has always been a little elastic, but did you possibly suggest that he was a buyer of stolen goods?"

"My previous acquaintance with Wu Ling saved me from wasting my breath," Gregory replied drily. "From what he said, however, I gathered that he did not immediately, at any rate, intend to dispose of the Image."

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"Mr. Endacott mentioned in the course of conversation," Borroughes put in, "that the business, although it had been immensely prosperous, was being wound up. The Image that you are speaking of, therefore, is certain some time or other to come upon the market."

Sir Bertram rose to his feet.

"We will have our coffee served in the library," he suggested. "Then we can pass into Henry's sanctum and examine our new possession. You haven't seen it yet, Borroughes, have you?"

"Not yet, Sir Bertram."

They left the room, crossed a fine tapestry-hung hall, and entered the great library with its arched roof and famous stained-glass window; a room of magnificent proportions. There were bookshelves reaching to the ceiling, and opposite the fireplace a wonderfully carved Jacobean sideboard on which coffee and liqueurs were already arranged. They lingered here for a few minutes. Then, with a brief word of invitation, Sir Bertram led the way to an inner door.

"You don't mind our invading your sanctum for a minute or two, Henry?" he asked, looking round towards his brother.

"By no means," was the slightly formal reply. "I was expecting your visit."

They passed through into a much smaller apartment, furnished with the most complete and unexpected severity. There was a touch even of monasticism in the bare, white stone walls, the high oriel windows and the furniture of austere shape and design. Here, again, were bookcases, containing, however, works of a different order from the calf-bound volumes in the library. There were books on heraldry, on china, on silver, on ancient furniture, books on all the various forms of art, starting from the Renaissance, to the most modern period, and

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one entire shelf was taken up by manuscript records, each stamped on the outside with the arms of Ballaston. On a pedestal of black oak, standing in the farther corner of the apartment, was the Image of the Body. Henry held a lamp above his head and the four men looked at this new family possession in silence.

"As a specimen of allegorical carving," Sir Bertram mused, "it is a marvellous piece of work. One could conceive that this might be the countenance of a man, even of a god, from whom every element of spirituality was entirely absent."

"A piece of work of great constructive merit, I have no doubt," Henry Ballaston observed. "As a subject for daily contemplation, I find it displeasing."

"Most people would, I think, agree with you, Henry," his brother conceded. "All the same we must not forget, the family fortunes being what they are, that, although the expert whom we have had down rather scoffs at the idea of there being jewels concealed inside, he expressed his opinion that the Image as it stands, with as much of its history as one would like to make known, is probably exceedingly valuable."

"A specimen of your purchases in China, Mr. Gregory?" Borroughes enquired.

"I didn't buy it; I stole it," was the young man's cool reply. "One does that sort of thing over there. I stole two of them. My friend and accomplice had his throat cut, however, and only one of the Images got through to the coast — the wrong one, I am afraid."

The agent looked doubtfully at his young host. It was a continual source of discomfiture to him that he never knew when a Ballaston was in earnest.

"I give you all warning," Gregory continued, "that this Image when separated from its companion is a pretty dangerous possession. According to the legend

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it is supposed to have a debasing and malevolent effect upon its owners."

"Well, there's only Henry in this house to be corrupted," Sir Bertram observed, stirring his coffee thoughtfully. "Nothing could make my reputation in the County worse than it is, could it, Borroughes?"

The agent looked uncomfortable. He was a person who laughed a great deal but who was utterly devoid of a sense of humour. Henry Ballaston frowned in troubled fashion.

"Your life is not a careful one, Bertram," he said, "and you are not exactly a pattern to your neighbours. Actual wrong-doing, however, is a different thing. No man yet has ever found opportunity to say a word against the honour of a Ballaston."

"That may come," his brother predicted, stretching out his hand towards the cigarette box. "We can't go on much longer without money, can we, Borroughes?"

"It is a difficult proposition, Sir Bertram," the agent replied gravely.

"Swindling to a city millionaire is second nature," Sir Bertram sighed; "financial acumen, I believe it is called. A county squire, however, finds few opportunities. — Off already, Borroughes?" he added, as the latter approached with outstretched hand.

"If you will excuse me, Sir Bertram. It's a darkish ride home and I have a sale in Norwich to-morrow and some accounts to look through to-night. Glad to see you back again, Mr. Gregory. Good night, Mr. Ballaston."

"I will accompany you to the door," Henry Ballaston announced, rising to his feet. "I may possibly not return," he added, turning to his brother. "You will naturally have a great deal to say to Gregory."

The two men left the room together. Gregory took

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an easy-chair with his back to the Image. His father refilled his glass with liqueur brandy, drew a box of cigarettes to his side and seated himself opposite his son. These were almost their first few minutes alone.

"Well, Gregory, old man, you couldn't quite bring it off then?" he observed.

"Not quite, sir," his son acknowledged. "We did our best."

"No doubt about that. You had a narrow shave of it, as it was."

"And all for nothing, I am afraid."

Sir Bertram rose to his feet.

"I'm not so sure about that," he rejoined. "The man they sent down from Christie's spent over an hour examining that Image. I've never seen a fellow so interested in my life. He had to give it up in the end, but he wasn't any more satisfied than I am."

Sir Bertram had wandered off into the other room, lifted the Image from its pedestal and, bringing it back, placed it upon his knee. The lamplight flashed upon its black, polished surface. To Gregory, its expression seemed, if possible, even more vicious than ever.

"Gregory," his father continued thoughtfully, "you know who told me the story. He was a man absolutely incapable of falsehood, and he knew what he was talking about. He was the greatest man in China in those days. I am as certain as I sit here that either this Image or the other one contains the whole of the treasure of the temple."

"Why not have this one broken up?" Gregory suggested.

"And risk getting blown to pieces?"

The young man shook his head.

"A bit too thick, that," he protested. "I have a wonderful amount of faith in the story, but I should

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think any explosive that was ever put inside there would be a little mouldy by this time."

"I'm not so sure," Sir Bertram reflected. "Those priests were always devils at protecting themselves against marauders. Besides, in any case, the thing as it stands is worth something."

"Let's sell it then?" Gregory proposed eagerly.

His father's eyebrows were slightly uplifted.

"Has the old gentleman been exercising his malevolent influence upon you?" he enquired, with a faintly sardonic smile. "Is that why you sent it me home in such a hurry?"

Gregory frowned gloomily.

"I simply know that I detest it," he declared vigorously.

Sir Bertram's expression, cynical only at first, suddenly developed humorous qualities.

"One might almost imagine you terrified by the superstition, my *ingénu* son," he murmured, turning the Image around and gazing into its features. "Gad, you're ugly, though! Different style, of course. Our vices are, after all, the vices of gentle people. Here we have an eloquent personification of brutality and bestiality. In real life I doubt whether this fellow would even be able to conduct an orgy with distinction."

"Put the damned thing down, Father," Gregory begged suddenly. "I lived with it for three weeks and I hate it like hell."

Sir Bertram strolled into the inner room and replaced the Image upon the pedestal. Then he came back to his son and laid his hand for a moment upon his shoulder.

"Gregory," he said, "you're not going to tell me in cold blood that you actually believe in the superstition."

"Of course I don't believe, but listen. I wanted the other Image. Johnson and Company wanted mine. I

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wouldn't sell — not likely, after all we'd been through. It was no good their naming a price for theirs, because we had no money. Do you know what Wu Ling, the Chinaman who rescued me and who apparently is one of the principals in the firm, suggested?"

"Well?"

"He offered to gamble with me — the winner to have both statues."

"How like a Chinaman," Sir Bertram murmured. "It was a good sporting offer, anyway."

"He got a pack of cards," Gregory continued. "Well — he won! I was to send this Image back from the steamer. I swear that when I left the warehouse I meant to do so. I had lost fairly, I suppose, and it seemed to me from the first like a debt of honour. I returned on board the ship. Then I looked at the Image and looked at it, and somehow the thing didn't seem so clear to me, and — damn it, I sent the coolies away and kept it!"

"Anything else?" Sir Bertram asked, after a moment's pause.

"Yes. You know that this man Endacott's niece was on board on her way back to England — Madame's niece, too, I suppose, by-the-by. Lord, what a mess-up! — Dad, we talk about most things pretty nakedly to one another, but we don't often talk about women."

"One doesn't," his father murmured.

"Listen then," Gregory went on. "She is young, entirely innocent, entirely adorable. I like her better than any girl I have ever come across in my life. We became great friends. Then we danced at night. You know what that means when you get near the Red Sea, and the Canal, and all the rest of it. Of course you do. We danced every evening, and all the time, down in my stateroom, that Image was leering at me. I began to

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feel that I was losing control of myself. I tried to keep away from her. She wouldn't have it. I made an ass of myself once and she forgave me. She thought that she herself had perhaps misunderstood. I was so ashamed of myself that, fortune or no fortune, I tried to throw the damned thing overboard."

"And what happened?"

"It pitched in an outslung boat and was brought back to me," Gregory explained grimly. "Afterwards — well, I offended again."

Sir Bertram sighed.

"I suppose God gave us the instincts," he murmured, "but the devil has toyed with them since."

"She scarcely spoke to me again," Gregory concluded, "except out of her sweetness when we met face to face on the dock at Marseilles. It was because of her I went on to Monte Carlo, instead of coming straight home, and of course I won. I played baccarat at Rome and won again. I brought home more pocket money than I ever had before in my life. But I hate that Image like hell. Now you know everything."

Sir Bertram moved to the sideboard, helped himself to a whisky and soda, and returned to his place.

"Confidence for confidence," he said, stretching himself out comfortably. "I'm not going to even comment upon your little confession, Gregory, because I don't know what sort of a fellow your friend Wu Ling was and I've never seen a Chinaman yet I'd trust for five seconds with a pack of cards. I've bad news for you, though, I'm afraid. We are pretty nearly broke. We can't go on more than a few more months."

"As bad as that!"

"I don't know how it is," Sir Bertram continued, "but luck always seems against the gambler who takes the big chances — especially when it really matters.

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If any man knows the points of a horse, I do. If there's any amateur understands racing, I do. I bought my yearlings right. I trained with Sam Roscoe, and there's none better, and the luck of old Harry's pursued me this year, just as it did last. Up to three days before the race Little June — you remember her — was favourite for the Derby. When you left England you know what I was doing. I wasn't waiting for starting price. I put on all I could at long odds. I got forty, thirty, twenty, and at eighteen I left off. Then, without any rhyme or reason in the thing, she went lame. She's done for. She'll never race again. It isn't worth telling you the whole story. I've finished — haven't a horse left. And I still owe Roscoe a thousand or two. You know old Mason, the bookmaker — well, I owe him seven thousand. 'Pay me when you can, Sir Bertram,' he said, 'and shake hands on it.' And I shook hands with him, but, Gregory — God forgive me — I've never paid him. The lands bring us in about thirteen thousand, taxes five thousand, interest on the mortgages a little more than the rest. Query — how do we live? God knows!"

There was a short silence. Gregory had thrown away his cigarette and his hands were clenching the arms of his chair. His face was set. The ghost of this threatened horror had risen up between them.

"It means breaking the entail, I suppose?" he muttered at last. "You and I can do it."

Sir Bertram rose to his feet, fidgeted for a moment upon the hearth-rug, then stooped down and laid his hand upon his son's shoulder. So far as it was possible for him to show emotion, he was showing it then.

"My lad," he said, "I am the sixteenth baronet. You would be the seventeenth. Sentiment, but hell all the same, isn't it? And, mark you, before we can sign

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the papers, I swear that Henry will shoot us. He's living in a panic. I feel his eyes upon me wherever I go."

"Is there any other way out at all?" Gregory asked despairingly.

His father once more disappeared into the inner room and returned carrying the Image.

"Gregory," he confided, "I believe in the legend. If the jewels aren't in this one they are in the other."

There was something in Sir Bertram's eyes which spoke of enterprise — something definite to be attempted. Gregory responded to it at once.

"I'll go back to China and have another try if you say so," he declared.

Sir Bertram glanced round the room as though he feared a listener. His voice, which was always low, became a whisper.

"You needn't," he confided. "The Soul is up at the Great House."

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CHAPTER II

RALPH ENDACOTT, erstwhile professor of Oxford University and partner in the great Oriental house of Johnson and Company, now an English country gentleman, sat before wide-flung French windows leading out on to the lawn, sunken gardens and miniature park of the Great House at Market Ballaston. In front of him was an oak writing table upon which were pen and ink and a steel-clamped coffer, apparently of great age but attached to which was a modern Bramah lock. Upon the blotting paper were a few sheets of yellow, unfamiliar-looking, thick paper, covered with weird hieroglyphics; in his left hand a pair of magnifying glasses. The scent of the roses from outside had disturbed him in the midst of his labour. He rang a silver bell which stood upon the edge of the table — rang it a second time. Claire, a flutter of cool white, swung herself out of a hammock close at hand and approached lazily.

"What is it, Nunks dear?" she enquired. "You know very well that none of the servants can hear that bell, only me."

"It was you I wanted," her uncle declared. "Tell me, child, in what devil-sent spirit of idiocy did I waste all those years in a musty, God-forsaken country, whose only charm is that no one can understand it and no one ever will. Was I a fool or am I a fool now?"

She laughed softly, leaning against the side of the open window.

"You were a fool," she decided. "I was a fool too, because I didn't believe in England. I didn't believe in the green, or the trees, the flowers, the softness, the rest of it all."

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"You were too young to be foolish," he said. "It is only the old who can find the way to folly. Do you know that during the last few days I have discovered some manuscripts which, if I had been seated in that musk-scented den in the corner of the warehouse, with the smell of the East in my nostrils and the soft, purring call of mystery all the time in the atmosphere, would have sent me into a state of wild excitement. Here, to-day, I am gently and pleasantly interested. I have learned values."

"Tell me about the manuscripts," she begged, passing finally through the window and throwing herself into an easy-chair close at hand.

"There is a love poem here," he confided, "written in his own handwriting by an emperor to a singing girl. I shall lock it away. It was not meant to be read by barbarians. Here are the details of the first plot to overcome the monarchy, and here," he went on, "is a document more interesting than any I have yet come across — more difficult to decipher, because there are priestly words in it and phrases not used in modern Chinese. However, I have mastered it so far as to know what it is about. In this atmosphere it is strange even to dream of it."

He paused for a moment. It was a lazy hour in a July afternoon. Even the birds had ceased to sing, but there were bees humming amongst the flowers and the sound of a reaping machine in a meadow on the other side of the red brick wall. Every now and then the roses bent their heads in a flutter of the light west breeze and lent wafts of perfume to an air already sweet with the odour of verbena and heliotrope.

"What about that last manuscript?" she asked.

He tapped the strange piece of thick, stained paper beneath his fingers, yellow in places, drooping at the

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edges, covered with what seemed to her to be meaningless hieroglyphics in the faintest of pink-coloured ink.

"This," he said, "is the letter of the High Priest of the Temple of Yun-Tse, addressed to the Emperor, and telling him what means he had adopted for guarding the secret jewels."

"Yun-Tse," she murmured, "the home of the Body and the Soul?"

He nodded.

"These few lines," he continued, smoothing out the paper thoughtfully with his long, bony forefinger, "to any one who can understand them, might easily be worth one of the great fortunes of the world."

"What are you going to do with it?" she enquired curiously.

He made no immediate reply, first folding up the letter and replacing it in the coffer, which he carefully locked. Then he rose to his feet and led the way out into the gardens.

"Tell me about that letter," she begged once more, as they seated themselves under the cedar tree.

"Part of the old story, at any rate, seems to be true," he confided. "Those two Images have always contained a secret hiding place, and somewhere inside them are stored the jewels of the temple. On the back of the document are instructions in the cipher of the priests, which as yet I have not been able to translate. I am not sure that I shall ever attempt to."

"But why not?" she asked wonderingly.

"If I did," he murmured, "I should know how to appropriate the jewels."

"But don't you want them?" she persisted. "Wouldn't that be very wonderful?"

He looked up through the boughs of the tree; a worn, tired-looking man, over whose high cheek bones

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the skin seemed tightly drawn. In ordinary European costume he appeared somehow to have shrunken, to have lost flesh and a certain amount of presence.

"It is nothing," he said. "Since I arrived in England it has cost me many a weary hour to invest my money. Yesterday I heard from the accountants who are winding up the affairs of Johnson and Company, and it seems that there are still great sums to come."

"All made in that strange warehouse!" she exclaimed.

"There and in Alexandria," he replied. "I went out to China, Claire, as your father may have told you, giving up a Chair worth eight hundred a year at Oxford, and owning, perhaps, a couple of thousand pounds. I became sort of unofficial adviser to Johnson and Company simply because there were things about China which no other European knew. I was very useful to them without a doubt, and in the end they made me a partner. Now that we are winding up the business, it seems that my share is worth something between three and four hundred thousand pounds."

"Amazing!" the girl gasped.

"Here," he continued, "in these few sentences may lie another fortune. I am an old man, and I ask myself what good could it do to me to place those secret jewels in the markets of the world, to hang them round the necks and the shoulders of American millionairesses and the world's courtesanes? We cannot breathe sweater air than this, or more delicious perfumes. We cannot look upon fairer scenes. We could not eat more, drink more or sleep more. For your clothes and such pleasures as you may care to indulge in you have already *carte blanche*. You are not one of those who will need money to buy herself a husband. So tell me, child, what could we do with more money?"

"I can think of nothing," she acknowledged.

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"Then, for the moment, at any rate, we will let the fortune remain where it is," he decided, "and keep our fingers unstained from sacrilege. Is this a fairy prince, Claire, or a very handsome young man in grey tweeds?"

She drew a little, fluttering breath. Her fingers closed over his.

"Nunks," she said, "it is Gregory Ballaston."

"That is a young man," her uncle observed, "with whom I might have something to say. Wave to him, Claire. He need not tug at that bell."

Gregory Ballaston, hat in hand, and probably less at his ease than on any previous occasion in his life, crossed the lawn towards them. Claire, leaning forward, watched him intently; her uncle with subdued and somewhat sardonic amusement. His attitude towards them both was entirely tentative. Claire offered her hand which he took gratefully.

"I have come," he announced, "to welcome you to Ballaston."

"Your obvious duty as our landlord," Endacott remarked, also offering his hand. "Pray sit down."

Gregory dragged up a wicker chair, with an air of relief.

"When you spoke of settling down in Norfolk," he observed, turning to Claire, "I had no idea that we might possibly become such near neighbours."

"Nor I, at the time," she answered. "How beautiful your house is. I spent quite half an hour this morning looking at it from the other side of the garden."

"I hope," he said, a little anxiously, "that you are going to give us the pleasure of seeing you there this evening."

"Your father has been kind enough to ask us to dine," Mr. Endacott rejoined. "I have just despatched a note, accepting with much pleasure."

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"I think you are very generous," Gregory declared, with a certain contriteness in his tone.

"The adjective seems to me to demand explanation," Mr. Endacott ruminated.

"You know very well, sir," Gregory continued, "that there are circumstances which would have justified you in refusing this invitation and refusing to meet me anywhere."

"Ah!" Mr. Endacott murmured. "That affair of the Image, of course."

Claire rose to her feet. Gregory waved her back again.

"Please listen, Miss Endacott," he begged. "I want you to hear what I have to say. You know what happened?"

She assented gravely.

"My uncle has told me," she admitted.

"I can assure you, sir," Gregory went on, "that when I left those extraordinary premises of yours, I meant to send you the thing straight back. I had one last look at it, however, and the longer I looked, the more uncertain I felt about the whole business. I kept telling myself that it was a debt of honour. Then I kept on finding poisonous ideas in my brain — ideas which I honestly believe I have never had before. I was parting with perhaps a great treasure just on the turn of a card — a Chinaman's turn of the card, too."

"You don't suggest," Mr. Endacott began ——.

"I suggest nothing," Gregory interrupted. "All I know is that my moral self — if I may use rather a grandiloquent term — was completely upset. I locked myself into my cabin with the Image. Soon after the ship sailed. Of course I know," he went on, "this must all sound stupidly inadequate, but there it is. Super-

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stition or no superstition, I swear that that Image has an evil influence. I have proved it."

Claire looked thoughtfully up into the trees; her uncle stroked his chin with an air of profound meditation.

"Well," he enquired, "have you found the fortune yet?"

"Not yet," Gregory admitted. "My father has had an expert down and he can discover no trace of any hiding place in it."

Mr. Endacott smiled very faintly.

"You must find that disappointing," he observed, "after all your efforts."

"If the jewels are not in this one," Gregory said, "they are probably in the other."

"Ah!" Mr. Endacott murmured.

"If it is not an impertinent question, sir," he proceeded, "is it true that Johnson and Company are relinquishing the business?"

"Quite true."

"Then the other Image ——?"

"The other Image is not for sale," Mr. Endacott said calmly.

"Who has it?" Gregory ventured.

"Well," Mr. Endacott confided, "the members of the firm were Wu Ling, a nebulous Mr. Johnson and myself. When I consider," he continued, "the extreme measures which you and your friend took to possess yourselves of these Images — measures, by the way, which may be justified by precedent but hardly by morality — I can scarcely, do you know, bring myself to reveal whether it is the domicile of Wu Ling, the possible mansion of Mr. Johnson in Alexandria, or my very conveniently near abode here, which might be indicated as the scene of your future adventures."

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Gregory was already sunburnt, but he felt his cheeks grow hotter.

"Well, I suppose I asked for that," he admitted grimly. "What about the Image, which is at present in our possession? To whom do you consider that it belongs?"

"The firm being now dissolved," Mr. Endacott mused, "the matter perhaps requires reflection. I will answer you later on. In the meantime, I shall leave you and my niece to better your acquaintance. My Eastern habits prevail. I desire to sleep."

He made his way towards the house; a lank, shambling figure, yet not without a certain dignity in his abstracted movements. Gregory glanced anxiously towards his companion. She remained seated in her chair, munching some chocolates from a box.

"Have one?" she invited, holding it out towards him.

He declined, but was conscious of a poignant sense of relief. With the airy tact of her sex she had demonstrated her position. It was to be peace, not war; oblivion, if not forgiveness.

"What an extraordinary stroke of fortune it is," he declared, "that you should have chosen this particular corner of Norfolk to settle down in."

"It makes the world seem a small place, doesn't it?" she remarked, frankly licking her delicately manicured fingers and placing the lid upon the box with a great air of determination. "It was my aunt living here, of course, which decided us."

"Madame," he confided, "has been the one picturesque figure in this neighbourhood for years. She was always beautiful, and she is always on the point of being cured. I believe that my father looks upon her as his greatest friend."

"She is very attractive," Claire admitted. "She

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wears the most beautiful clothes I have ever seen. I wonder whether it is a proof of vanity or of an immense sense of self-respect which leads a woman who spends her whole life upon a couch to take such pains with her appearance."

"If it be vanity, there is a leaven of philanthropy in it," he observed, "because every one loves looking at her. Besides, I believe now she really is going to get well. This new doctor who comes over from Norwich has performed some wonderful cures. It isn't as though the weakness had been born with her. It was all the result of that motor accident, you know."

"It would be wonderful if she got well," Claire murmured.

They talked for a while of trifles; the absence of other neighbours, the country around.

"When one gets over the spell of this lotuslike existence," she asked him, "what is there to do here — in the way of exercise, I mean?"

He looked down at the sunken lawn.

"Your tennis court used to be good," he said. "One of ours is quite playable and there are plenty of golf links a few miles away."

"Where does one buy horses?"

"At Norwich. Dad will tell you all about that. The hunting isn't bad. My father is master of one of the packs that hunt near here. They begin cubbing at the end of next month. The shooting parties will give you plenty of exercise too, if you are fond of walking."

"I like all these things," she admitted, a little more earnestly, "and I love this garden. The peace of it is almost stupefying. I feel somehow or other that I should like to grow old in this atmosphere."

"You never would," he rejoined.

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She laughed at him. Suddenly she was serious. She leaned forward in her chair.

"In a few minutes," she said, "I must go in to see Madame. Before you leave, though, I want to ask you just one thing. What was the chief reason which made you in the first instance come over to China on that mad adventure?"

"Money," he answered bluntly.

"But why do you need money? You have the most beautiful home I ever saw."

He laughed with a bitterness which he took no pains to conceal.

"It is to keep that home," he explained, "that we need money. Perhaps you scarcely understand the troubles that a certain class of English people have had to face lately, especially people who come of extravagant stock, like my father and me. It wasn't pure love of adventure that took me out to China. It was the hope of saving Ballaston if I succeeded."

"Is it really as bad as that?" she asked sympathetically.

"Worse," he rejoined. "I believe that my father has finally made up his mind that there is no chance of saving the place."

She was thoughtful for several moments, affected even perhaps more than she realised by the note of dejection in his tone. His enterprise, which had presented itself before to her imagination as a sort of buccaneering feat, not exactly reprehensible but faintly tinged with sordidness, suddenly showed itself in a new light. She realised alike the chivalry of it and the pathos, and how near he had been to success.

"Unless, after all, you discover the jewels," she observed, a little abruptly.

"I am afraid there isn't much chance of that," he

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sighed. "Somehow, over here it seems absurd to take these superstitions seriously, but I can't get away from the feeling that if the jewels are in existence they will never be discovered so long as the Images are separated."

She leaned a little towards him.

"The jewels do exist," she assured him softly.

A touch of the old frenzied earnestness came back to him. His eyes glistened, not altogether with cupidity, but with the adventurer's pride in success.

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

She hesitated for a few moments. Yet, after all, why should there be any secrecy? The adventure, such as it had been, was finished. Here in this quiet backwater of life there seemed something grotesque about it all. Nevertheless she spoke uneasily, almost reluctantly.

"My uncle has discovered a manuscript," she confided. "The jewels are there."

"In which Image?" he enquired breathlessly.

She shook her head.

"I cannot tell you any more," she said. "In fact, I do not know any more. Everything rests with Uncle. If you can persuade him to let you have a copy of the manuscript or to tell you what is in it, perhaps, after all, you will find yourself rich again. If I can help I will."

"If one only knew in which Image!" he muttered.

"Why, what difference could that make?" she asked, smiling. "If they are in yours, well, some day or other I am sure you will be able to secure them. If they are in his, then I am afraid your adventure will have been in vain."

The sunlight caught her hair as she leaned once more back against the cushions. Gregory suddenly forgot the jewels. He was uneasy, unsure of himself, curiously

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stirred by an unexpected wave of feeling. His sense of proportion diminished. There had been a cataclysm and nothing remained on earth but this old-world garden with its elm trees and its odorous cedar, and Claire!

"It will never have been in vain," he declared, with a curious little break in his tone.

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CHAPTER III

If at times Mr. Endacott seemed a little out of his milieu at Ballaston Hall that evening, Claire, on the other hand, was an instantaneous and gorgeous success. In the Jacobean banquetting hall where she sat at her host's right hand, her fresh, girlish beauty, with its additional charm of a constant and piquant enthusiasm, seemed in exquisite contrast to her majestic but gloomy surroundings; the great, dimly lit room, the stately rows of oil paintings, the cumbersome but magnificent furniture, impressive not because of any intrinsic art of selection, but because it was true to its period and had grown old with the house. Sir Bertram, whose attentions to the other sex, apart from times of necessity, had become rarer with the years, was, before the evening was over, proving himself not only a courteous, but even a devoted host, and Henry, who voluntarily never addressed a woman at all, actually waited for opportunities to attempt conversation in his old-fashioned, Thackerayan, but courtly fashion. Gregory watched her success with complacent amusement, content with temporary effacement, and resigned himself to the entertainment of her uncle.

After dinner they entered upon a general and informal exploration of the house, of the great picture gallery with its shining oak floor and its circular carved balustrade, leading down to the hall below, the Victorian drawing-room, its colourings quaintly sweet by the light of the lamps, its perfume a fragrant mixture of lavender and *potpourri*, curiously reminiscent of brocaded gowns, hooped skirts and vinaigrettes. They looked into the powdering closet on their way out and lingered for a

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few minutes on the south terrace, from which stretched a moonlit panorama of Italian gardens with tall cypresses, broad walks leading down to the lake. Claire became almost silent. She and Gregory had drifted a little apart from the others.

"At least," she murmured sympathetically, "I realise now how terrible the very thought of parting with your home must be."

"It has been ours since 1380," he told her. "Uncle Henry could tell you the exact date and the name and record of every Ballaston since. I can't pretend that my memory is as good. I never had much head for detail, but we are all alike in our love for the place."

"I know I am very ignorant," she said, a little hesitatingly, "but your pictures — the Gainsboroughs and Corots and Romneys, and all those treasures too — surely they must be worth a great deal — a very great deal of money."

"They are all heirlooms," he explained, "just as the land is entailed. They belong to us as Ballastons only. We could not sell a single picture. I don't know why I should tell you all this," he went on, "except that just now and then you seem to think that I was only an ordinary fortune hunter. I wasn't, you know, really. I went to China to try to get the money to keep us going. It may have been the wrong way, but it was the only way I was any good at. We haven't the instincts, any of us, for making money by legitimate methods."

"You should do like so many young Englishmen," she suggested. "Come over to the States and marry one of our millionairesses."

He made a little grimace.

"We all, even the worst of us, have our code," he reflected. "Personally, I would sooner rob a man. Besides ——"

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She turned towards the open windows through which was an impression of the faded but stately drawing-room, fine davenports and costly china, with little pools of shaded light falling upon stretches of carpet delicately blue, though threadbare in places.

"I think we had better go inside," she said, with sudden decision.

"Nevertheless," he murmured, as he followed her, "there is a 'besides'."

They found the others in the smaller library, standing in a little semicircle round the Image of the Body. They had evidently only just arrived, for the door of the main apartment was open behind them and through it was a vista of liqueur glasses and coffee cups.

"You are an authority, I believe, Mr. Endacott, upon all matters connected with the East," Sir Bertram remarked to his visitor.

Endacott nodded. He had adjusted his more formidable-looking spectacles, through which he was steadfastly regarding the Image.

"I think," he admitted drily, "that I might be said to know more about Chinese art and Chinese *objets d'art* than any other man alive."

"I gather from my son," Sir Bertram continued, "that you are acquainted with the history of this particular Image."

"Intimately," was the somewhat sardonic reply. "The fellow statue to this one — the Soul — was acquired, after the desecration of the temple, by the firm with which I was connected in China. Their antiquity alone, apart from their history, makes these twin Images intensely interesting. They are reputed to have been the work of Yun-Tse, the priest after whom the temple was named, and to have been fashioned for the purpose of concealing the jewels and treasures of the temple in

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times of danger. I see no reason to doubt the truth of the story."

"Amazing!" Sir Bertram murmured.

"Yun-Tse," Endacott proceeded, "was the first apostle of Chinese arrestment. He preached the doctrine that China had advanced far enough along the great avenues of art and science and knowledge. He looked still farther ahead and he saw that material progress meant actual retrogression in feeling, in beauty, in genuine achievement. It was he who started the crusade against foreigners."

"From an æsthetic point of view," Henry Ballaston ventured a little stiffly, "one can find little to admire in this very extraordinary piece of work."

Endacott turned towards the speaker, his thin lips protruding.

"Only by contrast with its fellow," he retorted sharply. "It was the wish of the sculptor, a wish which has been zealously kept through the centuries, that the two statues shall never be separated. Each is the complement of the other. Body and Soul commingled make one life. The artist dragged aside the component parts and separated them. Here in this one we have all that is gross and evil, unredeemed by any strain of virtue, and in the other statue there is charity and spirituality without a trace of the defiling qualities. They are parted now, perhaps for ever. I cannot say that I regard with equanimity the action of the person responsible for this deed of vandalism."

There was a moment's silence. Endacott's voice was contemptuous, almost provocative. Gregory was on the point of speech, but Claire's fingers suddenly pressed his arm.

"Your point of view, Mr. Endacott," Sir Bertram admitted courteously, "is easily understood. Yet I am

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afraid that the spirit of loot has been rampant in Englishmen throughout history, else the British Empire could scarcely have existed. And speaking of loot," he went on, "we come to the one really serious question concerning our possession here. Do you honestly believe that at the present moment it is as it stands the receptacle for a portion of the jewels of the temple?"

"I certainly do," was the curt reply.

Again silence; a little tremor of excitement amongst the group. Sir Bertram laid his long, slim fingers upon the broad, shining edge of the Image.

"But, my dear sir," he pointed out, "what possible place of concealment could there be in, say, this particular Image? Examine it as carefully as you will, you cannot find any sign of a join or aperture."

"The Chinese have with justice been called magicians," Endacott observed drily. "At least, when they hide they hide. If there had been, as you remark, any aperture or join to be seen, theirs would have been a clumsy device at the best."

"If the jewels are there," Sir Bertram reflected, "and we can find no other way, then the statue must be broken up."

Endacott turned towards his host. His manner and expression were alike displeasing. The glance which flashed from behind his heavy spectacles was one of utter contempt.

"You carry vandalism beyond the conceivable limits of thought," he declared. "The person who could destroy work such as that would deserve the fate which would probably befall him."

"There are times," Sir Bertram rejoined, "when necessity is compelling. Let us turn this from an abstract to a concrete discussion. My son risked his

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life to obtain this Image and the one which was unfortunately lost — risked it in the belief that it contained jewels of great value. Am I not right in saying, Mr. Endacott, that you could, if you would, assist us in the matter of obtaining those jewels?"

"I could," Endacott replied quietly. "I have at the present moment a manuscript in my possession which I believe would solve the riddle."

"You will not refuse your help then," Sir Bertram persisted.

Endacott did not hesitate for a moment. His tone was acid, his manner brusque to the point of rudeness.

"I do most certainly and absolutely refuse," he said. "To have removed the Images at all from their resting place was an unforgivable action. This spirit of loot you speak of presents itself to me as an act of common robbery. I refuse to countenance it. I refuse my help."

There was a brief silence; awkward, yet in a sense dramatic. Henry Ballaston, who had been standing a little in the background, took a step forward, then paused. The parchment-like pallor of his face was almost ghastly. There were pin-pricks of fire in his cold, blue eyes. Nevertheless, he said nothing. Such words as had risen to his lips he repressed. Sir Bertram for a moment had looked frankly angry. He too, however, remained silent. Mr. Endacott turned his back upon the Image and strolled across towards the sideboard.

"May I be privileged," he asked, "to smoke one more of your excellent cigarettes? After which, I will beg you to excuse my niece and me. We have the habit of retiring early."

Sir Bertram was at once the courteous host. The discussion was closed.

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"I shall not attempt," he said, "to do my few treasures the injustice of showing them by this light, but I hope, Mr. Endacott, that you will give me another opportunity of asking your opinion on them — you and your niece," he added, turning with a smile to Claire. "You know we have quaint customs in England," he went on. "We have laws by reason of which we become only the custodians of all our treasures. There are pictures here of great value and great beauty, and three generations of my family spent fortunes in collecting china."

"I shall be very happy to see your collection," Endacott assented. "I know little about pictures; something, perhaps, of china."

"My brother Henry is our showman," Sir Bertram observed. "He gives the whole of his time to the care of our treasures. By-the-by, my sister — Lady Annistair — will be here on Sunday afternoon. You will, perhaps, bring your niece to tea. It would be a good opportunity for a preliminary inspection."

Endacott accepted without enthusiasm, but with a certain measured politeness, which was as far as he ever progressed towards geniality. Gregory escorted the departing guests to the already wide-flung hall door. Claire made a little grimace at him, as they dropped behind for a moment.

"I am so sorry," she whispered. "Perhaps he'll change his mind."

"In any case," he answered softly, "thank you for being sorry."

He walked out with them into the scented twilight and Claire waved him another little farewell as they rolled off in the hired car. When he returned to the library he found his father and his uncle both standing before the Image. They turned at the sound of his approach-

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ing footsteps. There was something a little suggestive in their unnatural silence.

"Pleasant fellow, your friend Endacott!" the former remarked easily.

"It is much to be hoped," Henry Ballaston said, in a low tone, "that he will not persist in his present most unreasonable attitude."

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CHAPTER IV

Sir Bertram, very lithe and debonair in his grey flannels and Panama hat, issued from his front door, whistled to dogs who seemed to come to him from all directions, and, humming snatches of music from an almost forgotten Italian opera, stepped down from the terrace and strolled across the park, keeping as far as possible in the shade of the great oak trees. Arrived at the boundary he vaulted over the stile, exchanged greetings right and left as he passed down the village street, and, turning along the lane to the right, pushed open the gate of the Little House and knocked at the door with his ash stick. At a word of command, the dogs settled down to watch wistfully for the end of their vigil, and Sir Bertram, admitted by an elderly and ungracious-looking domestic, entered the little hall, where he laid his hat and stick upon an oak chest, and afterwards passed into the long, low room, the door of which the maid had opened. A woman lying upon a couch held out both her hands; long, beautiful hands, ringless and almost transparently white. He raised them to his lips and drew a chair to her side.

"You grow more beautiful every day, Angèle," was his greeting.

The faintest tinge of colour stole into her ivory pale cheeks, and her eyes filled with a very affectionate light. There was not a single grey thread in her carefully arranged golden-brown hair, yet it was obvious that she was no longer a young woman.

"And you," she murmured, "I listen here sometimes for your footsteps, and I look down the lane, and I can never tell whether it is you or Gregory who comes. You

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are a wonderful person, especially considering the life you lead," she added, with a little grimace.

"My dear," he said, "we are all the victims of predestination. It is such a comfortable doctrine that I have embraced it permanently. I am a Ballaston and Gregory will be one after me."

"So far as that is concerned, Henry also is a Ballaston," she reminded him.

"Henry," he pointed out, "is not an elder son. It is the elder sons who inherit the full measure of the virtues and vices of our family. Henry, I admit, is a freak, God bless him!"

"So you had my relatives to dine last night," she remarked. "Tell me what you think of my niece."

"The most amazingly attractive young person whom I have ever met in my life," he replied, with what was for him enthusiasm. "As a rule I find extreme youth overpowering — a mixture of shyness and precocity, you know."

"She is certainly beautiful," Madame murmured. "Presently I shall get used to her and like to have her near me. Just now I find youth a little depressing. Gregory has altered."

"It is disappointment," his father sighed. "He had a stirring adventure, though. I suppose he has told you all about it."

Madame nodded.

"After all," she said, "he brought one of the Images home."

"And a lot of good to us it is," Sir Bertram remarked ruefully. "There is only one man who could help us, Angèle."

"Ralph?"

He nodded silently.

"A most impossible person," Madame sighed. "His

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feet are on the earth, his head in the clouds and his heart in China. I am afraid, as a matter of fact, that he utterly disapproved of Gregory's enterprise."

"Dog-in-the-manger-ish, I call it," Sir Bertram grumbled. "You can't say that jewels collected by the priests of a temple, which have been hidden for practically a hundred years, belong now to any one in particular. I am afraid I still have sufficient of the Francis Drake outlook to claim that they belong to whoever has the courage and the wit to find them."

"The buccaneering spirit," she observed, with a faint smile of amusement. "You always had it, my dear Bertram. Nothing, I am sure, except the most rigid sense of honour, has kept you from robbing your friends."

"I shall probably have to end my days doing that," he sighed, "in some Continental Spa or other. Another year will see us through at Ballaston."

She took his hand and held it.

"We won't believe that," she said softly. "Something must happen."

"I don't exactly see what."

"You ought to have married," she declared. "When I think of the young women — heaps of them with any amount of money — who were in love with you! You ought to have married again."

"I had the best reason in the world, dear Angèle, for remaining single," he replied. "We won't speak of that."

She turned her head towards the window and her beautiful eyes were for a moment a little less clear. The window looked out on to a very pleasant strip of garden, almost of the cottage variety, crowded with flowers and with a long, narrow pergola still hung with roses. Inside, the room itself, with its grey walls and hangings,

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its few French etchings, the cabinet of choice china, seemed to possess also some measure of the distinction of its owner.

"Bring me my mirror and vanity case from the table, please, Bertram," she begged. "Smoke, if you will. You will find your own make of cigarettes there."

He did her bidding, his head almost touching the ceiling of the low room when he rose to his feet. Madame busied herself with a very exquisite little gold case, peering at herself meanwhile in the mirror.

"I have an idea," Sir Bertram remarked, as he lit a cigarette, "that your brother dislikes me."

"Why?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose he has every reason to, Angèle, from a brother's point of view, and most other people's, too."

"If any other person said that to me," she rejoined quietly, "I should be very angry with them indeed. You have given me all that I have had worth having in life — more than I ever dared to hope for. You give me now what keeps me alive."

He took her fingers in his and held them. They were interrupted by the entrance of a maid who brought a little tea table to her mistress' side; a very dainty affair, with a Queen Anne silver teapot and two Sèvres cups, thin bread and butter, cream and lemon.

"Miss Besant still going on all right?" he enquired, as soon as they were alone again.

"She is good after her fashion," Madame acknowledged. "She is a discontented creature with queer humours, and the usual moodiness of the unmarried girl of thirty. God knows I'm trying enough! One can't blame her if she gets jumpy sometimes. She does her best."

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"And Sir James," he enquired; "has he been down this week?"

"He comes again on Monday," she answered. "I am keeping up everything — massage, baths and diet. As a matter of fact, I think I'm getting fat. Anna and Miss Besant were quite out of breath when they carried me to my room last night. What do you think?"

She threw on one side the beautiful lace wrap which had covered her, and her eyes looked towards him with faint, provocative enquiry. He passed his hand along her arms, and gently over her body. She had the figure of a thin but graceful child of fourteen, except that her feet and ankles were more beautiful.

"I see no change in you," he assured her, "during all these years. Illness seems to have kept you young. Do you know that you are still very beautiful, Angèle?"

Again the faint flush, the gleam of softening happiness in her face.

"You mustn't turn my head, please," she begged.

"Then I must leave off talking," he replied, "for you are fast turning mine. Shall I read to you?"

"De Musset, please. The little volume of later poems. I kept them for you."

He read for half an hour, sympathetically and well. When he laid down the volume her eyes thanked him.

"You are missing Ascot," she remarked, as he made preparations for departure.

He nodded. "Between ourselves," he confided, "I owe my bookmaker just a little beyond the limit of the amount with which I care to allow him to credit me. I haven't a horse running, as you know, or in training. It seems to me I shall have to get through the summer on golf and tennis. I am going to try and keep the

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hounds, although of course it will be the last season."

"Poor dear!" she murmured. "And poor idiot too! You know I have money, Bertram — a great deal more than I need. I don't spend half of it, and Ralph says there is more to come to me. Why mayn't I help?"

He bent down and kissed her tenderly.

"My dear," he said, "if ever the day comes when I can call myself your husband, I may accept your bounty. Until then — well, we won't talk of such matters."

A delicate little wrinkle of dissatisfaction furrowed her brows. She shook her head at him.

"You are terribly obstinate," she sighed. "You will come on Thursday?"

"Without fail," he promised.

The dogs rose up from all sides as he passed out. He lingered for a moment to talk to the rather sulky but not unpleasant-looking girl, who was cutting some roses in the strip of front garden.

"Madame looks well," he observed. "I hope that you are still content with the neighbourhood, Miss Besant?"

"I like it very much," she assured him.

"If the doctor decides to permit Madame's visit to the Hall next week," he added, "we shall have, I hope, the pleasure of seeing you there."

She thanked him a little stiffly. Sir Bertram whistled to his dogs, gazed for a moment at the high red brick wall opposite, which encircled the domain of the Great House, and, with a little bow of farewell, turned towards the village.

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CHAPTER V

THAT evening Endacott, in response to an urgent summons, rose somewhat reluctantly from his chair under the cedar tree, finished his coffee and offered a grudging explanation of his departure.

"Your aunt has sent in to say that she wishes to see me particularly," he confided to Claire. "Just the hour of the day when I like to rest!"

"What a pity!" she murmured. "Shall I come with you?"

He shook his head.

"No need for two of us to go on a fool's errand," he grumbled.

He crossed the lawn, passed down a gravel path, and, opening the postern gate, made his way into the lane which divided the Great House and the Little House. A moment or two later he was ushered into Madame's drawing-room.

"You did not mind coming, Ralph?" she asked a little anxiously.

"As a rule," he admitted, selecting a chair close to her couch, "I prefer my evenings undisturbed. Since you expressed a wish to see me, however, I am here."

His tone seemed scarcely propitious. She looked at him wistfully. The years, she decided, had treated him hardly. There was little of sympathy in his face, little left of gentleness. Almost from the first she felt that her task was hopeless.

"Sir Bertram came down to see me this afternoon," she began.

He nodded without speech, and waited.

"He comes down every other day when he is at

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Ballaston," she went on. "No one in the world, Ralph, has ever been so kind to me."

"That," he rejoined, "may be a matter of opinion."

"But Ralph," she pleaded, "it isn't a matter of opinion at all. It is a fact. I ought to know, oughtn't I? Look at me. What am I but a poor invalid woman, the victim of a terrible accident. My limbs have been almost useless for years. Even now I can scarcely move. I am a depressing sight for any one. What but real affection and kindness could bring him here day after day?"

"Did kindness," he asked bluntly, "prompt him to take you away from your husband?"

"Bertram never took me away from Maurice," she expostulated. "Maurice left me — left me for some Algerian dancing girl, for whom he bought a villa at Cannes and on whom he squandered half his fortune. All the world knows that. Bertram brought me back from Paris a crushed, humiliated woman. It wasn't his fault that he was in the motor when the accident happened."

"There have been different versions of the affair," Endacott declared moodily.

Madame's eyes suddenly flashed.

"If you dare tell me that I may not love Bertram — that I do not love him — that there is any sin in my loving him, then you are a fool!" she cried. "Of course I love him. No one in the world could ever have been so wonderful to a woman as he has been to me."

"His reputation," Endacott began ——

"Ralph!" she interrupted indignantly. "You are too great a man to talk such shibboleth. I dare say he has been a roué, and a profligate and a great gambler. I dare say he has squandered his money, has been reckless and selfish, but don't you understand,

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Ralph, he is of the sort of men who could never treat a woman badly? I wish I could make you understand. At least, believe me that Bertram has treated me from the moment we first met — even when I was desperate, willing in my heart to consent to anything — as though I were a thing almost sacred. He kept my self-respect alive. I'm a broken creature now, but all there is in my life worth having I owe to him."

Endacott moved a little uneasily in his chair.

"Well," he said, "we will not dig into the past. It is scarcely profitable, anyhow. Your message said that you wished to see me particularly this evening."

"Ralph," she begged, "we have drifted a long way apart, but we were children together. Can't we talk in a little more friendly fashion? Can't you look as though you remembered that we are still brother and sister?"

He took her hand a little awkwardly.

"My dear Angèle," he pointed out, "the very fact that I chose to come here is proof that I remember it. I returned to England partly for Claire's sake, and partly because I wished to be near you. I admit that I did not know that you were living in the shadow and the lustre of the Ballaston régime, but that is nothing — prejudice, without a doubt. I came. If I could make your life easier, I would be glad. Is it money? I have plenty."

She shook her head.

"I want to save the Ballastons," she confided.

"Are they in any particular danger?" he asked coldly.

"You can't have lived here even this short time without knowing it," she answered. "Bertram's father was a great gambler, and Bertram himself has gambled. Quite true. He has raced and made a failure of it.

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That also is true. He has kept expensive establishments everywhere, spent money like water, lived altogether beyond his means. All quite true. Other men have done this, Ralph, who are not worthless, and Bertram Ballaston is not worthless. Every acre of the estate is mortgaged now. Unless they can raise money within the next few months there is nothing left for them but to break the entail, pay their debts and disappear."

Endacott was unmoved, his indifference apparent.

"Would the world be any the worse?" he ventured.

"We will leave the world out," she entreated. "It would break my heart."

"What can I do about it?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Perhaps nothing," she admitted. "I do not ask you to attempt impossibilities."

"What do you ask?" he persisted doggedly.

"Bertram believes," she went on, "that in that Image which Gregory went out to China to try to secure is hidden a treasure."

"Secure," he sneered, "is a quaint word."

"I won't argue with you about that, Ralph," she said. "The fact remains that it was a dangerous adventure for a young man and it was undertaken for a worthy object. He risked his life, didn't he, a dozen times over? Perhaps he failed. You know best."

"What do I know?" he demanded.

"Whether he really has a chance of finding the treasure — whether the story is true."

Endacott was silent for several moments, no longer indifferent, gazing into the lamplit recesses of the room, the muscles around his eyes more than once twitching.

"Supposing that it is true," he suddenly burst out, his long frame distended, his thin lips parted so that his yellow teeth almost protruded, his eyes steely —

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"supposing it is true that he has, say, a portion of them in his grasp — the treasures which the priests of Yun-Tse have collected through all the centuries — what are they but the emblems of self-sacrifice, the gifts of men aiming towards spirituality, denying themselves to give to some shadowy god? Think of it, Angèle — century after century, denying themselves, those poor creatures who lived with their heads bent to the land, feeding like cattle, living and dying like sheep, denying themselves for the sake of that strange vein of spirituality that runs through all so-called heathen races. Is all their self-denial, all they went through, the result of it all, to go to reinstate in luxury and prosperity a family of foreign roués and gamblers?"

"Why go into the history of the treasure?" she demanded. "What about all the treasures of Peru and Mexico, brought into the old world? Where did they come from? Who asks? Who cares? What about the adventurers all the world over, who wrenched from the new countries they risked their lives to discover, gold and gems and metals and brought them to the melting-pot of life? You were not always a sentimentalist, Ralph," she went on, after a moment's half-choked pause. "You know perfectly well that if the gems are there, whatever their history may be, they are no good to any one hidden and unseen. If, on the other hand, they belong to any one to-day, any one family, any one power, they belong to the family who learned of their existence and whose son went out and risked his life to acquire them."

"You are very eloquent, Angèle," he observed in a noncommittal manner.

"Every one who believes what they say is eloquent," she rejoined.

He rose to his feet and walked to the further end of

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the room abruptly and without excuse. For several moments he looked out of the window, first across to the red brick wall bordering his domain, and then down the narrow lane at the end of which half a dozen villagers were gathered together, sluggishly gossiping. Above the roofs of the village was the sloping park, but the moon had not yet risen and here was only a sea of obscurity. On his way back he poured himself out a glass of water and drank it.

"Angèle," he said, "our lives have lain very far apart. I have seen very little of you, understood very little of you. Did you love De Fourgenet?"

"I have loved only one man," she replied, "and I have loved him, not, as you believe, for his unworthiness, but for his worthiness. De Fourgenet turned my head for a week — and neglected me for years. I loved Bertram from the first day we met. He knew it and never once took advantage of the knowledge."

"I would to God I felt convinced," he exclaimed, almost passionately, "whether you tell the truth or lie to shield the man you love."

"I tell the truth," she assured him with fervour. "Anything there might have been between Bertram and myself would have been at my seeking, not his. He is of the race of evil-doers, if you must call him an evil-doer — God knows they exist — to whom women are sacred."

Endacott thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and sank almost sulkily lower into his chair. It was as though he were being convinced against his will.

"Well," he confided, "here is the truth — as much of it as I know. The Ballastons have one of the two Images. I have the other. Nothing from a structural and material point of view suggests the presence of treasure in their interior, and yet I believe that the

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jewels are there. For years there has been deposited with us a coffer of manuscripts which came first from the Summer Palace of the Emperor and afterwards from the Temple of Yun-Tse. One of those manuscripts which I am now deciphering professes to give precise instructions as to how to secure the jewels. There are only a few passages which I cannot master. I am going to London in a day or two to obtain from the British Museum a dictionary of Mongolian dialects, which is the only thing I need to help me to complete certain phrases. You might think that I could guess at them. I cannot, because even the manuscript is in code. I need the actual letters. I believe that the jewels are in one or both of the Images. Within a week I shall know how to extract them."

She laid her fingers upon his arm.

"Ralph dear," she begged, "when that time comes — you are wealthy ——"

He stopped her. For a moment the expression of almost superb scorn in his face lent him an unusual and unaccustomed dignity.

"Angèle," he interrupted, "you do not understand. If I were a pauper, I would refuse to supply the material needs of life with the accumulated offerings of these peasant worshippers. But as it happens, money is no temptation to me. I am already rich. In fairness the treasure such as it is should go back to China. If I were a younger, stronger man, the crowning joy of my life would be to take it back and to choose for myself how to distribute it. That, however, can never be. I will try to be fair from your point of view. China has a claim to the treasure. That young man, Gregory Ballaston, may be said to also have a claim — a claim which I should never have admitted for a single moment but for your prayers. Leave it to me. I will decide."

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There was between them a long and rather wonderful silence. The church clock behind the cottages in the background chimed twice before either of them spoke. Madame was lying flat on her back, her eyes watching the moon rising slowly over the top of the red brick wall. Endacott, as though overcome with a curious fit of exhaustion, was seated almost huddled up in his chair. Finally he rose wearily to his feet.

"I am tired to-night, Angèle," he confessed. "We understand one another?"

"We understand and I pray," she answered, grasping his hand.

He left the house then and, instead of immediately entering the postern gate opposite, turned his face towards the village. There were a few lights burning in the windows of the irregular row of houses, scarcely a person in the street. He walked to the corner of the lane and looked down the main thoroughfare. At its further end was a trough and a market cross, on the stone balustrade of which some boys and girls were seated, plunged in eloquent silence. From behind one of the drawn blinds came the sound of a gramophone, and through the open door of the Ballaston Arms the wheezing of a concertina. Up in the background some scattered lights flashed out from the far-spread windows of the Hall, the outline of which was not yet visible. Endacott retraced his steps slowly. In his ears was a faint tinkling of other music, grotesque, monotonous, yet thrilling; before his eyes a strange admixture of roofs; beneath his nostrils an odour which never sprung from the soils of Norfolk; in his brain a confused tumult of thoughts.

Claire, a little bored, a slim, white figure in the violet darkness, leaned forward and waved her hand as he entered the postern gate.

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"Nunks, what ages you have been!" she exclaimed. "Have you been with Aunt Angèle all this time?"

"Not all the time," he admitted.

"Where have you been then?" she persisted. "You look half asleep."

He sank back into his chair. Again he seemed to hear the echo of some tinkling instrument, to find in his nostrils a perfume more pungent even than the perfume of the cedar tree. To him there was something ominous in what seemed to be almost a message of recall.

"A long journey," he muttered, a little vaguely.

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CHAPTER VI

It was only after he had shown her around the picture gallery on the following Sunday afternoon that Claire properly appreciated Henry Ballaston. She listened to his last little dissertation — stiff perhaps and a trifle pedantic, and yet in its way eloquent — as to a supposed Romney, with something more than interest, almost enthusiasm. Here was a man who spoke from his heart of things he loved, and a man whom no one in the world, meeting him casually, would have suspected of possessing such a thing as a heart.

"Tell me what first made you love these things so," she begged.

She had seated herself upon the huge divan at the end of the gallery from which, in the afternoon light, was a wonderful view on one side of the great oil paintings which lined the staircase, and on the other, through the wide-flung mullioned windows, a curiously beautiful vignette of the park with its beech and oak trees, and beyond, at the top of the slope, the famous home covert.

"I have had no other life," he told her calmly. "At Eton I developed no tastes either for athletics or affairs. At Oxford they spoke of the Church. The suggestion was repugnant to me. I had some inclinations towards Roman Catholicism, but the Ballastons have always been a Protestant family. I considered the army and discarded the idea. All the time, wherever I was, I wanted to come back to Ballaston. In the end I came back. The old librarian here had just died, and somehow or other I drifted into his place. That was twenty-seven years ago and it seems almost like yesterday."

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"A wonderful life!" she murmured.

"It would have suited few other men," he rejoined. "It has suited me. I have activities out of doors as well as within. There is scarcely a tree in the park, for instance, whose history I could not tell you, nor an acre of the gardens I have not watched through the winter and summer; I have helped to protect the fruits and flowers from the frosts, and tried my best to gather in the sunshine for them. Indoors, of course," he went on, after a moment's pause, "has been the scene of my real labours, if labours they can be called. I have catalogued the pictures and the china, the armour and the various curios, after a style of my own, with the history, so far as possible, of each of the masters, the date and a copy of such criticisms as have appeared in the press. The catalogues, you observe, are all written by hand."

She pored over the vellum-bound manuscript book which he had been carrying, turning the pages, and glancing at the extracts written with great care in a stiff, clerkly handwriting.

"Why, this must have taken you ages," she exclaimed.

"There are thirty-two similar volumes," he confided. "The compilation of those alone took me four or five years. I am very fortunate in my tastes, because, you see, I am not an ordinary custodian. I was born with these pictures, these Titians, and Corots and Murillos on the lower staircase, and those others, just as great but with lesser names, that hang upon the left-hand side of the galleries. On rainy days I have walked from end to end and seen something different each day and each day of each year. That is how, I suppose, affection for a home and its treasures grows. That is how, at any rate, in me has grown up a great love for this

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house and all that it contains. It will never be mine — I do not wish that it should, but I have my share in it. I am a Ballaston and even if I were turned away — and neither Bertram nor Gregory would do that — I think that my spirit would still haunt these staircases."

"You make one realise," she sighed, "how we waste our lives caring for indifferent things."

"The choice is always with us," he reminded her gently. "In youth, however, there are other tastes and inclinations which it is as well for us to gratify. For instance, I see they have commenced to play tennis, and Lady Annistair is looking towards the house. Shall we go down?"

"Not yet," she begged. "I am loving being just here. Tell me some more, please."

"You are very sympathetic," he acknowledged, "and you see I am disposed to take advantage of you. Sometimes indeed it is a relief to talk of one's hobby. Bertram loves his home and the traditions of his family almost as I do, but he has lived outside, moved in the great places. They are a sentiment to him, whereas they are a religion to me. And Gregory too — he is a little like that. It is only natural. To me no sort of career has ever appealed. I suppose that is why I have filled my life with this one thing. To-day we have only spoken of and looked at the pictures, but there are other treasures. Every Ballaston for many generations has collected china. One day I must show you our collection. There is something more to be appreciated there than its mere appearance. I will show you what design can really come to mean, what age can do to colouring. Then you will laugh at me, perhaps, but I am almost as foolish about our cellars. I have watched the laying down of all our clarets mid sherries and ports and Madeiras. Season by season I have given

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away or disposed of all of every vintage that disappointed. That is why every one in the county speaks of the Ballaston cellars. I cannot, alas, bring the new things which make life so easy and luxurious to Ballaston. We have no electric light or heating, and I am afraid you would laugh at our bathrooms. But there are some of our bedchambers which are wonderful. King James' room, for instance, with the rosewood bedstead and original damask, and the tapestries which were sent from the Palace, has scarcely ever been touched."

"Let me ask you something," she begged. "May I? You will not think it impertinent?"

"Ask me what you will, by all means, my dear young lady," he answered. "You have come here quite unexpectedly, but you have captured all our hearts. It will please me to tell you anything you care to know."

"Tell me then — there isn't really any fear that all this may have to go?"

His face was suddenly the face of an old man. The primness of it, the self-control, the sphinx-like mouth, all seemed to fall away together. It was an old man looking at death.

"I cannot answer that question," he confessed, and even his voice was different, metallic and toneless. "Bertram entered life with great ideas, and unfortunately his wife, who was a gracious and charming lady, and who would have been a great heiress, died when Gregory was born. Then Gregory grew up very much in the same fashion as his father. The war came and no Ballaston ever knew how to save money, or to save himself at other people's expense. We are in terrible financial straits, and all the time there have been fresh mortgages. I myself am not an expert at business, but I have spent weary days and weeks thinking

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and adding up and wondering. Unless there is money soon, it seems to me that the lands must all go, and the house be sold up."

"It would break your hearts," she said softly.

"It would be death," he answered. "If I could save Ballaston," he went on, a little added strength in his voice, a glow, although a steely one, kindling in his eyes, "I would commit any crime on earth. I would kill, I would murder, I would destroy, I would plunge my soul into immortal misery to save the vandals from the auction rooms in London from coming and laying their hands upon the pictures and china and trees, or the furniture, and tramping about the rooms where history has been made. Sometimes lately I have awakened in the night and found myself crying out with fear, found great drops of sweat upon my body, and it hasn't been a knife at my throat or any horror of that sort, but men with catalogues, little Jew men with *pince-nez*, peering at the pictures; fat, coarse-looking men floundering through the rooms and looking at the hall-marks of my china through magnifying glasses."

He paused suddenly. When he spoke again he was a different being.

"My dear young lady," he apologised, "I beg your pardon. It is not often that I let myself go like this. In fact, to tell you the truth, it has never happened before. Will you excuse me if I hurry you downstairs now? I know that they are waiting, and I must not monopolise you."

She rose to her feet, still silent, curiously indisposed for speech, feeling in her youth and inexperience that deep though her sympathy and even her understanding, she still had no words to offer.

"You see how one gets," he concluded, as they descended the stairs, "through dwelling on one subject

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and one subject only. I am a man with one idea, but for that idea I am willing to live; for that idea I would be quite willing to die. — Here is my nephew Reginald — a little angry with me, I fear, as the others will be, for having kept you so long."

A tall, fair boy, Gregory's younger cousin, who had come over from Annistair with his mother, met them in the hall disconsolately.

"I say," he complained, "I think Uncle Henry has been most unfair. We are all waiting to play tennis with you, Miss Endacott. No one will play another set until you come. Gregory is fuming, the tea is cold, and Mother is quite convinced that you have fallen down an oubliette — there is one somewhere about the place, you know. You're in disgrace, Uncle Henry, I can tell you!"

They all strolled out on to the lawn, and Claire made her apologies at the tea table.

"Please remember my transatlantic weaknesses," she begged. "A house like this is more wonderful than any museum. It is just illuminating. — No tea, thanks. Some lemonade and one of those cakes."

Sir Bertram, who had been playing a single at tennis, shook his racket at his brother.

"Henry," he declared, "you are sent to Coventry. I appointed you showman with considerable self-sacrifice, and gave you half an hour. You have been away for an hour and a quarter."

"And we haven't finished yet," Claire insisted. "I have had the most interesting afternoon of my life. I don't believe there is another house like Ballaston in the world."

"Did you bring home any treasures from China, Gregory?" his cousin asked him. "What is that horrible-looking wooden Image in Uncle Henry's room?"

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"That's about the only treasure I did bring home," was the somewhat grim reply. "Worth about a million, I believe, if you knew how to handle him."

"A most unprepossessing-looking object, my dear Gregory," his aunt observed. "It may be valuable — I hope for your sake it is, if you didn't give much for it — but as an ornament it is absolutely repulsive."

"Just what it is meant to be," Gregory confided. "It typifies material fortune cut adrift from all redeeming inspiration. Material fortune is the one thing which we do not associate with this house."

"Don't get gloomy, Greg," his cousin drawled. "Here comes my beloved sister at last. Let's have a four. Aren't you going to play, Uncle Bertram?"

"The elders," Sir Bertram replied, "are going to watch your prowess this set."

"A jeer!" Gregory exclaimed. "Don't ever let my father take advantage of you that way, Miss Endacott. He can give me fifteen and owe fifteen and beat me when he feels like it."

They trooped back on to the tennis lawn, played, sat about under the cedar trees, talked and gossiped until nearly seven o'clock. Claire excused herself from playing in the last set and found a chair near where Henry Ballaston was seated.

"I haven't thanked you half enough for this afternoon," she said gratefully.

"I am afraid you must have found me very prolix," he rejoined. "You must excuse an old man with one idea."

"I think the man with one idea," she answered, "is the most satisfactory person in the world. As a rule he makes something of it. — You spoke this afternoon for a moment of Sir Bertram's wife. Tell me more about her."

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"My dear, there is not a great deal to tell," he replied. "She was a little younger than Bertram, very beautiful, and devotedly attached to him. She was the daughter of the Earl of Rutland, who has an estate on the other side of the county. She died when Gregory was born. If she had lived eighteen months longer, she would have inherited a fortune of nearly three quarters of a million pounds. It was very unfortunate."

"Was Sir Bertram very much in love with her?"

"Very much indeed. In fact, so far as I know, he has only looked seriously at one other woman since, and she too has come under the shadow of a tragedy. We are not a fortunate family, Miss Endacott."

"That may come," she ventured reassuringly. "The treasure of the Image may materialise after all. Somehow or other, I believe that it will."

"My dear," he said, "it is a very fantastic story for a simple-minded man to believe, but if there's truth in it — if there should be truth in it, then I must confess that I am moved by the same spirit which prompted my brother to conceive the expedition and Gregory to risk his life in carrying it out. If the jewels are there, no superstition, no confused sense of morality, no fear even of being branded as a wrong-doer, would stop me for one moment from taking them. In this matter I sympathise with the more bellicose side of my family."

There was something almost threatening in his words. His eyes were held by an approaching figure. She looked towards the ring-fence which bordered the park. Mr. Endacott had just passed through a little gate and was advancing towards them. In his rather sombre attire and drooping black felt hat, he presented a strange appearance; an appearance half grotesque, half sinister. With expressionless face, he shook hands with Sir Bertram, who came forward to meet him. Although the

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sun was still very powerful, his cheeks were colourless, he showed no sign of unusual warmth.

"I regret my tardiness," he said, in reply to some polite speech from his host. "I became absorbed in some work. I failed to notice the hour."

Sir Bertram led him away to be introduced to his sister. Claire was suddenly aware that her companion had lapsed into speechlessness. His eyes had followed the newcomer's every movement. They were fixed upon him now in a curious, set gaze. There was an expression in his eyes and about his mouth, which, for a moment, made her shiver.

"Mr. Ballaston!" she exclaimed.

He did not appear to hear her. Instead, he seemed to be muttering something to himself. She saw his lips move but heard no sound.

"Mr. Ballaston!" she repeated.

He was himself again. He rose to his feet.

"I beg your pardon," he apologised. "I permitted my attention to wander. The coming of your uncle reminds me of a task which I still have to perform."

He left her with a little bow, and turning towards the house, stiff, formal, precise, keeping always in the middle of the path and ascending the grey stone steps with measured tread, disappeared a few moments later through the wide-flung oak doors. She watched him until he was out of sight, unaccountably disturbed. Then Gregory came and claimed her. There was to be still another set of tennis.

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CHAPTER VII

ENDACOTT laughed cynically but not altogether unkindly when Claire had finished her carefully prepared little speech that night after dinner. Their coffee had been served as usual out of doors under the cedar tree and Claire had returned with her uncle to the study, still pleading the cause which the events of the afternoon had made to her almost vital. He went at once to the sideboard and helped himself to a whisky and soda.

"It is fortunate, Claire," he said, "that I am a person of even temperament; fortunate for you, perhaps, that I appreciate your presence here and your companionship so much. I have listened to you, I think you will admit, with patience. I shall now be as frank with you as I was with your Aunt Angèle last evening."

He took a long gulp of his drink, uncovered a tobacco jar and filled his small pipe. Afterwards he exchanged his dinner coat for a dressing gown which had been placed on a chair in readiness, tied it round him and seated himself at the writing table. He dragged the steel-clamped coffer of manuscripts to his side and produced the key from his pocket. He did not at once open it, however. He swung around and faced Claire.

"You women," he pronounced, "stir my anger with these violent partialities. God knows your Aunt Angèle has nothing to love those Ballastons for. Yet she in her pleading was even worse than you. Father and son, they are both of the same mould; selfish, intolerant, proud, good to look at, if you will, but parasites in the great world of deeds and thoughts. I will grant them courage but I deny them principle. I ask myself in

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wonder why I find you pleading for them? Well, I know. They have the gifts women love, the gifts which make women miserable. Fools! Your Aunt Angèle is a fool! You are a fool!"

"I don't think we are anything of the sort, Uncle," she retorted bravely. "I can't even see that it is foolish to ask a perfectly reasonable thing for people whom you like. Sir Bertram may be everything that you say. I only know that I like him. I don't like bad people as a rule, but I like him."

"And what about the son?" he demanded, his eyes narrowing, his thin but bushy eyebrows coming together.

"I like him too," she declared stubbornly. "I was very angry with him on the steamer coming over, but since then I think that I understand him better."

"You are not fool enough to be in love with him?" he asked.

She stood for a moment without replying. The hand which was gripping the back of the chair against which she was leaning moved convulsively. Her eyes were a little misty, her tone, when she answered, almost indignant.

"That is a horrid question to ask, Uncle," she declared. "You may be a very learned man, but you know nothing about girls — American girls, anyhow. We don't fall in love. We leave that to the men. Of course I know that Gregory Ballaston is of the same type as his father and they naturally are not the type which would appeal to you, but I like him. I like to play tennis with him, I like to have him talk to me, I like his friends. He treats me charmingly. And I love dear Mr. Henry. I have never spent a more interesting hour than I spent with him this afternoon. He is delightful — a wonderful personality. To me it is a

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tragedy to think that they are going to lose their home. If the story of this treasure is true and you can help them to get the jewels, why don't you? You don't want the money. You said the other day that you had more than enough. They have one of the Images. The other one Gregory risked his life to obtain. You don't want yours. Let them have both and tell them how to get the jewels."

Endacott puffed at his pipe steadily. He had the appearance of seriously considering the matter.

"You talk well, child," he admitted. "You remind me of your father: You talk sense too. That pleases me. You shall have the truth from me, at any rate. I believe in the treasure. I believe that in twenty-four hours from now I shall know exactly how to obtain it. When I know how, I will reconsider the whole matter impartially. I promise you that. It is practically what I promised your aunt."

She made a little movement towards him, a gesture, an exclamation of gratitude. He waved her back.

"Let me warn you," he continued, "my present inclinations are to devote the treasure which I may discover to building a university in Pekin for the benefit of young Englishmen and Americans who wish to study the inner history and the truth about the greatest nation in the world, and, if the treasure should realise sufficient money, to build others in Boston and London for the benefit of the young Chinese. Ask yourself now, would not the money be better spent in that way than in handing it over to this piratical, degenerate family, to gamble away on horses and women and every manner of extravagance; to breed another generation of dissolute Ballastons who would lead the same life, and another very likely after them? What do you think, Claire?"

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The girl answered without hesitation.

"I would rather the Ballastons had the money."

"You won't argue the matter?"

"I can't. I would rather the Ballastons had the money. A part of it, at any rate, belongs absolutely to them."

"Although Wu Ling actually won back the statue Gregory took home with him?"

She hesitated this time, but only for a moment.

"You mustn't be angry with me, Uncle, but I have always had it in my mind that Wu Ling is a Chinaman and that he dealt the cards."

Endacott sat quite still for a moment, gazing at his niece. Then he did what was for him one of the rarest things in life: he began to laugh. He laughed until the tears stood in his eyes, until he was compelled to remove his spectacles and wipe them. When he had finished, he took another gulp of his whisky and soda.

"Claire," he said, "you please me. You have done your cause no harm, at any rate. Now listen. Andrews and the servants know, but I forgot to tell you. I am leaving for London by the 7:40 train in the morning."

"Going to London!" she exclaimed.

His face, now that the fit of mirth had passed, seemed unnaturally stern and strained.

"There is still one visit which I must pay to the British Museum," he confided; "one sentence alone which troubles me. I know where to look for the key, however. I shall return by the five o'clock train. As I have promised you, I will then, so soon as I am sure of the treasure, make up my mind as to its disposition. You had better go to bed now. Let me repeat that you have done your cause no harm by our conversation this evening. On the contrary, you have probably done good, but I wish now to be alone. Good night!"

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She came over and kissed him, thankful for that episode of humour, somehow or other aware of a vein of more complete humanity in him during the last hour. He accepted her salute perfunctorily, patted her hand and waved her towards the door. As soon as she had departed, he turned the key in the coffer.

For at least a couple of hours Endacott worked in peculiar fashion. Stretched out before him was the sheet of paper upon which he was writing, above it the manuscript, yellowed with age, which he was continually studying. On his left were the Chinese dictionary, a vellum-bound manuscript dictionary of phrases, having the appearance of great age, and a collection of notes mostly compiled at the British Museum and secured with a paper fastener. On the sheet in front of him were set out the letters of the Chinese alphabet. At times he slowly transposed these. One whole sentence had already taken to itself concrete shape. Then, in the midst of his labours, he suddenly paused. His pen remained stiff, his head was upraised. He listened. Outside it seemed to him that the breathless calm of a hot summer night had formed the background for a slight noise, the faint rattle of a pebble displaced; a footstep, it almost seemed. He listened again. The night, though light enough, was moonless, and he could only see a few yards through the window. He opened the left-hand drawer of his bureau, thrust his hand into its furthermost recesses, and drew out a small revolver. Then he rose stealthily to his feet and hesitated. He had not passed the greater part of his life in an undisciplined country without learning certain precautions. To stand in front of that window was to expose himself, a clearly defined mark for assault, if indeed there should be marauders about. He leaned over and turned out the electric light, crossed the room swiftly with the revolver in his hand,

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and passed through the window into the garden. He stood still, listening, with his back to the wall. There was an owl calling plaintively in the little grove of trees between the miniature park and the kitchen garden. Then silence — the faint barking of a dog a long way off — silence again, and at no time anything unusual to be seen. Nevertheless he lingered. Pebbles can scarcely become detached without human agency. His eyes tried to pierce the shadows. There was a dark shrub near the wire fence — or was it a shrub? He was suddenly convinced that it was the stooping figure of a man. He started forward, crossing the lawn with swift footsteps which gradually slackened. As he grew nearer he was disillusioned. The shrub took to itself shape. Its similitude to a man disappeared. He stood and looked around him. Behind was the gloomy outline of the house, with one light burning in a top window from the servants' quarters. Of the village one or two roof tops alone were visible, but the lights had long since been extinguished. Around him was a dimly seen vista of trees and shrubs and flower beds, a perfume in the air — but silence. He walked slowly towards the house, the butt of his revolver still gripped firmly in his hand. There was nothing to be seen nor any sound to kindle anxiety, yet he was never devoid of that uncatalogued sense which bespeaks the close presence of something concealed, something inimical. He took to walking in circles. He was imagining always some one stalking him from the rear. He reached the study windows, however, without tangible sign of any intruder. He pushed them open and entered. The room was in darkness. He found his way to the switch and turned on the light. Instantly all his vague premonitions materialised. The papers upon his desk were in disorder, the curtain in front of the Soul had been dragged

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aside, although the Image still remained there, smiling down upon him. He switched on another light and looked round the room searchingly, his firmly held revolver following his eyes. The room was empty. He looked towards the window. Almost at that moment he heard the soft swinging-to and closing of the gate leading from the back avenue. The intruder had apparently taken alarm and departed.

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CHAPTER VIII

GREGORY, on presenting himself at the Great House on the following morning, received the news of Mr. Endacott's absence with marked interest.

"Gone to London, has he?" he observed. "That means that you're left alone for the day."

"Scarcely a tragedy," she smiled. "There's my aunt across the way whom I must go in and see some time, a perfectly delightful new piano that only arrived this morning, dozens of books to read and, if I feel energetic enough, I am going to practise mashie shots with the club you gave me."

"A thoroughly selfish programme," he pronounced.

"Why selfish?"

"Because it is a solitary one."

"Improve upon it then," she suggested.

"Easily," he assented. "I brought my two-seater round, anyhow, hoping for the best, but with your uncle away the thing is preordained. I have given you six lessons at golf in the park. You're doing thundering well, but not well enough. Let's go to some real golf links."

She considered the matter.

"Where?" she enquired.

"Cromer," he answered promptly. "It may be rather crowded there but we shall arrive late. We can choose two or three vacant holes, have some lunch at the club house and motor home another way."

"I should love it," she acquiesced enthusiastically.

"I'll go and tune up the old bus while you get ready," he suggested.

It was a day which she never forgot; a day when

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all the little things went right, into which no jarring note of incident or conversation was ever introduced, when the sun shone, when everything which happened seemed to become an aid to further content. They motored lazily along the country lanes to the links, where Gregory was obliged to go and fetch the professional to see his amazing pupil. Afterwards they selected clubs, lunched, sat on the terrace for a time and motored by a devious way homewards. A mile or so from Ballaston, just inside the park, crossing which had afforded them a short cut, he stopped the car in the shadow of a great beech tree. She looked at him enquiringly.

"Puncture?"

"Sheer fatigue," he rejoined mendaciously. "Great strain driving a car like this. Do you mind, just for a moment?"

"Why, surely not," she answered, leaning back and taking out her cigarette case. "It's perfectly delightful here. Won't you smoke?"

He shook his head.

"Not just for a moment," he answered, looking straight at the mascot upon the bonnet of his car. "I want to talk and I'm a jolly bad hand at it, anyway."

"You're not so hopeless," she assured him encouragingly. "You can go straight on. I'll help you out when it's necessary."

She spoke lightly enough but already a queer little sense of excitement warned her to keep her face turned away from his. The things which he might say seemed incredible. She was passionately anxious and yet afraid to hear them.

"You see, Miss Claire," he began, "I made a jolly bad start with you and that makes me extra careful. I never thought I was going to turn superstitious, but

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I can assure you of one thing — I haven't trusted myself alone in Uncle Henry's room with that Image since I got back."

"I hope your Uncle Henry's behaviour," she began, with a faint smile ——

"Oh, don't chaff," he interrupted. "I think it would take the devil himself to persuade Uncle Henry to step out of the narrow paths. This is what I wanted to say — Claire."

He paused again, unrebuked. His eyes looked up the avenue towards the house. His slim fingers played nervously with the steering wheel.

"We're in for a big family smash, we Ballastons," he confided. "What little there is left when it comes will have to go, of course, to the governor and to Uncle Henry. For me there won't be anything. I'm not complaining. I'm young enough still. I have wonderful health and, although I'm an ass at all the things that money's made out of, I can ride, I understand farming and horses and all that sort of thing. I have made up my mind what to do. I am going out to Canada."

"Canada!" she murmured under her breath.

"Yes. I know some fellows there who are doing quite decently. I shall be able to get just the sort of start I want. Now of course," he went on, "under the circumstances, I ought not to say what I'm going to say to you, but I am going to say it all the same. I asked you to marry me once, Claire. It wasn't any good, of course. You had only seen the rotten side of me then, but you understood. To-day I can't ask you to marry me, but I want to tell you that I have all that feeling which a man should have when he asks such a thing, and ten thousand times more than most men have."

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He paused again. She said nothing. Her face was turned even a little farther away. He went on.

"Of course, I've done no particular good in the world — have been all sorts of a rotter from one point of view — but I've kept moderately straight about girls and here's the truth, anyhow. I never came near caring for one before, and I love you."

"Gregory!" she whispered.

At the sight of her eyes, the sound of her voice, he was suddenly swept almost off his feet. It was amazing.

"Sweetheart, you mustn't," he begged, holding her hand firmly. "I know I'm doing wrong to tell you. On the other hand, it seems to me that I would be doing wrong if I went away and you didn't know. So there you are! I can't ask you to marry me, but I'm going to work like a horse as soon as I get away, and if I have any of the luck of the Ballastons they used to talk about, I shall only value it for one thing. I'm not asking you for anything — not for a thought even, much less a promise — but if at the end of a few years I see my way — I wonder ——"

"You dear thing, Gregory," she interrupted. "Kiss me at once."

"You know I didn't mean this, Claire," he said, a little remorsefully, as he stopped the car at the gates of the Great House.

"I hoped you did," she answered demurely.

"Idiot!" he smiled. "Remember, we're not engaged. You haven't promised anything. You've been sweet and dear and given me just the stimulus for work I needed."

"Supposing," she whispered, "that you found the treasure; you might not have to go to Canada."

He shook his head gloomily.

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"I daren't trust myself to think about that," he said. "Your uncle seems to have made up his mind not to help us, and I'm beginning to lose faith in the whole story."

"Still," she persisted, "if the story should turn out to be true — and Uncle believes it — your home might be saved, and you would not have to go abroad at all."

"It would be wonderful," he admitted.

"Don't give up hope then," she whispered. "Uncle was quite sweet to me last night — absolutely different. He's gone to London — but perhaps I ought not to tell you. Just wait. Something pleasant may happen, after all."

The door was thrown open by Andrews, the butler. She gave Gregory her hand which he held for a moment and raised to his lips. Her farewell glance lingered long in his memory.

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CHAPTER IX

ENDACOTT, although abstracted, seemed for him to be in an almost genial frame of mind when he obeyed the summons of the evening gong and, meeting Claire in the hall, waited to enter the dining room with her.

"A tiring day, Uncle?" she asked him.

"Not particularly," he answered. "I made only two calls. Phillpots kept me some time at the British Museum, or I could really have caught the earlier train. — How is the piano?"

"I haven't tried it," she admitted.

"Your aunt all right to-day?"

"More confessions, Uncle. I haven't even seen her."

Endacott, as he took his place, removed his spectacles for a moment, rubbed his eyes wearily, and then looked across at his niece.

"What have you been doing all day then?" he demanded.

Claire summoned up all her courage.

"Mr. Ballaston called for me and I went over to the Cromer Golf Links with him," she confided. "I had a lesson at golf, some lunch, and afterwards we came home through Blakeney."

Her uncle, rather to Claire's surprise, made no comment. The service of dinner appeared to interest him more than usual, and he certainly ate with appetite.

"Railway travelling agrees with me, I think," he remarked. "I feel that I shall enjoy working this evening. After dinner I shall have a pipe on the lawn with my coffee, and then — the half-hour which I have been looking forward to for so long."

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"Did you get what you wanted from Mr. Phillpots?" she asked him, with a queer little note of eagerness in her tone.

"I did," he admitted. "Unless I am very much mistaken, I can fill in all the missing spaces in that manuscript within an hour. By-the-by, Claire, you didn't come down again last night after you had gone to bed, did you, or hear anything unusual?"

She shook her head.

"I was much too sleepy. Why?"

He toyed nervously with some bread upon his plate. His eyes sought hers almost furtively.

"Just an idea," he said. "I left my work for five or ten minutes and walked around the garden. When I came back, my papers were all disturbed."

"I didn't stir out of my room after I went upstairs," she assured him. "Was anything missing? Were there any papers there that mattered?"

"As it happened there were not," he replied. "If it had been to-night — well, it might have been different, although a manuscript in Chinese, even though translated, as it will be, would be scarcely likely to attract an ordinary thief, would it?"

She moved in her chair a little uneasily.

"I should think not," she replied. "In any case, if you were only out of the room for a few minutes, who could have entered without your seeing them?"

"Just so," he agreed. "As you suggest, it might have been fancy, or a breath of wind from outside, or the opening of a door."

"You mustn't sit up too late to-night," she told him. "You are looking very tired."

He nodded gently.

"All the work I have to do," he said, "will be finished

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in an hour. Afterwards I may write a letter while you go in and see your aunt."

His sudden fit of what was for him almost garrulity, left him and he relapsed into his usual silence, punctuated only by monosyllabic replies to Claire's remarks. He accompanied her into the garden, however, at the conclusion of the meal, and whilst they sat together over their coffee he asked her an abrupt question.

"How old are you, Claire?"

"Twenty-one," she told him, "twenty-one last May."

"You are a sensible girl," he went on. "When I heard that I was going to have a niece to look after and that she was coming out to China for me to take her to England, I must confess that I was terrified. Such an upheaval in my daily life seemed to me calamitous. I have been agreeably surprised. Your coming has been a pleasure to me, Claire. I only wish that you had come before."

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. It was the first time he had ever spoken to her in such a fashion.

"I am a poor adviser for a young girl," he continued, a little regretfully, "and I am afraid that your aunt is hopelessly prejudiced in the matter. I cannot bring myself to believe, however, that the society of this young man, Gregory Ballaston, is a good thing for you. I distrust the family ethics. I cannot help thinking that he is hoping through you to arrive at the information which so far I have refused his father and his uncle."

"I was with him for several hours to-day, Nunks, and he never even mentioned it," she ventured. "He is going out to Canada in a month or so to earn his own living."

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Endacott sighed.

"I am full of prejudices," he confessed. "The last twenty years of my life have been spent in abstractions, have passed like a dream, away from the world which counts, which one ought really never to lose sight of. I should be an ill-adviser to any one. — Go and play something."

Claire disappeared into the house and soon the sound of her music drifted out in little ripples of melody through the perfumed stillness. Her uncle listened for some time without any sign of pleasure or the reverse. Then he rose to his feet and looked up across the roofs of the village, over the green slopes in the background, to where a few lights were slowly appearing from the windows of the Hall. Presently the music ceased and Claire stole out to him. She passed her arm through his.

"It is a very beautiful home that, Uncle," she said softly. "Don't you think it would be a sin to have it all broken up?"

"A better race might follow," he muttered.

She shook her head.

"They belong," she said gently.

He turned away with a little grunt and entered his study. For a few minutes Claire flitted round the garden. There was a nightingale singing somewhere in the distance to which she stopped to listen. Even the noises from the village, through the gathering twilight, became almost melodious. Presently she passed through the postern gate, strolled across the lane and entered the drawing-room of the Little House through the wide-flung windows. Madame lay stretched upon her couch, listless and weary. She welcomed Claire with only the ghost of a smile.

"Where have you been all day, child?" she asked.

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"Enjoying myself, I am afraid," was the remorseful reply. "Gregory came and fetched me and we went over to Cromer."

"How did he seem?" Madame enquired, with a shade of interest, almost eagerness, in her manner. "Was he very depressed?"

Claire shook her head, thankful for the twilight.

"He seemed very much as usual," she answered; "if anything a little nicer. I enjoyed my day very much. The only thing I felt was that I was neglecting you."

Madame made a faint gesture of denial.

"I am very glad to think that you had such a happy day, dear," she said. "I am glad you came in for a moment, though. I don't know why it is, but to-night I have nerves. Where is your uncle?"

"Working away as usual at his Chinese manuscripts," Claire replied. "He went to London this morning and came back at five o'clock."

Madame nodded.

"I saw the car go with him and bring him back. I don't know how it is, but the sight of every one to-day makes me uneasy. Even Bertram seemed queer. He sat with me for an hour this afternoon. As a rule he soothes me. To-day, somehow or other, he frightened me. I feel as though there were a sort of psychological thunder in the air."

"Aunt, you mustn't let yourself imagine such foolish things," Claire begged. "Everything and every one is as usual. Uncle, as a matter of fact, was in remarkably good spirits this evening."

"Can any one help fancies and presentiments, my dear, who lies here hour after hour, day by day, as I do," Madame sighed. "I know it is silly, but instinct is stronger than reason, and Bertram, at any rate, was strange to-day. Every now and then he left off talking

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and there seemed to be something always behind his eyes."

Miss Besant entered the room and Claire called to her. She began to make preparations with firm, capable fingers, for moving the couch. Claire bent over and kissed her aunt.

"No more morbidness, please," she insisted. "I'll be over early to-morrow morning. I may have some news for you."

"Your uncle has found what he wanted in London then?" Madame asked.

Claire nodded assent.

"He told me a short time ago," she confided, "that in half an hour he would know everything there is to be known."

She crossed the lane and passed through the postern gate, gazing wistfully over the roofs of the village houses towards the park. Her preparations for the night, when she finally reached her room, took her longer than usual. It was late when, after she had turned out the lights, she moved to the window and stood there for a moment looking out. Suddenly the little reminiscent smile upon her lips changed to one of actuality, of real and instant pleasure. The moonlight was as yet faint, but, crossing the stile which led from the park, she caught a glimpse of a white shirt. For a moment she was tempted. He might be coming even as far as the gardens, late though it was. Then she looked back at her neatly folded clothes and shook her head.

"Claire," she soliloquised, "you're a sentimental idiot!"

After which she turned out the light, got into bed and slept soundly.

When she awoke the sun was shining into her room,

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the thrushes and blackbirds were singing and there were sounds of unusual movement downstairs. Still only half awake, she sat up, listening to the footsteps upon the gravel beneath her window. There were voices too, muffled, yet agitated. Then she heard one word — a dramatic, horrible slur against the background of the summer morning.

"Dead! — Cold dead he were!"

For a moment she shook herself. She felt that she must be in a nightmare. Then she became conscious of the reality of those footsteps below, the renewed murmuring of awe-stricken voices. She sprang out of bed. Before she could reach the window, she heard the same hoarse, shocked voice, with its quaint Norfolk inflexion.

"Shot right through the head, that's what happened to he. Writing there at the table with his papers lying all over the place. There's a revolver on the floor. Police Sergeant Cloutson won't have it touched."

She leaned, screaming, out of the window. Amongst the little crowd below were the village policeman, both the gardeners, and Mr. Wilkinson, the clergyman.

"Tell me what has happened?" she cried out frantically.

They seemed all stricken dumb.

"Tell me, tell me what it is?" she insisted.

Mr. Wilkinson turned towards the front entrance.

"If you will put on a dressing gown and come to your door," he said, "I will speak to you."

She met him halfway down the stairs. Her knees were trembling, and she clung to the banisters for support.

"Tell me what it is?" she demanded. "Is it Uncle?"

"My dear young lady," he announced solemnly, "a terrible thing has happened. You must prepare your-

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self for the worst. Your uncle has been shot through the head, apparently at some time during the night. The doctor is with him now, but — but he is quite dead."

"Dead!" she repeated mechanically.

"All his papers are in a state of great disorder," the clergyman concluded. "I am afraid — it is a terrible thing to say, but I am afraid there is no doubt that your uncle has been murdered."

END OF BOOK TWO

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BOOK THREE

CHAPTER I

THE new tenant of the Great House, installed within twelve months of its dramatic vacancy, issued one evening through the small postern gate, set in the red brick wall which encircled his gardens, into the village street. This was his first appearance since he had taken up his residence in the neighbourhood, and he was consequently an object of absorbed interest to such few loiterers as were about. An elderly roadmender, who was making half-hearted assaults upon a broken piece of road with a pickax which seemed too heavy for him, looked up curiously and touched his hat. The post-mistress, warned by a subordinate, hastened immediately to the entrance of her establishment as though to consult the church clock. Mr. Franks, the butcher at the corner of the street, hurried out on the pretext of giving some parting instructions to a boy who was just starting off on his bicycle with a special order for the Hall, and Mrs. Moles, who kept a small general shop and was reputed to know the genealogy, morals and predilections of every one within a dozen miles around, stared unabashed over the top of her curtains.

The first impressions of the newcomer, to be privately exchanged within the next hour or so, could scarcely fail to be favourable. Peter Johnson appeared to be a man a little under medium height, sturdy, clean-shaven, with bright, steady eyes, humorous mouth, brown, sun-dried

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complexion and hair inclined to greyness. He wore a tweed knickerbocker suit, a Homburg hat; he carried an ash stick, and his age might have been anything between forty and fifty.

No one was more interested in their new neighbour who was now engaged in making his leisurely way along the village street, than the three men in the bar parlour of the Ballaston Arms. Conscious of their own invisibility behind the muslin curtains, they yielded without restraint to their curiosity.

"He do seem an ordinary kind of a man," Thomas Pank, the innkeeper observed critically.

"A sportsman, maybe," Mr. Craske, the grocer, suggested, appreciating the costume of the approaching figure.

Rawson, the butler from the Hall, shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. Every one listened for his comment with interest. He was admitted to be a man of the world and a person of considerable experience.

"I should say not," he decided. "He is wearing the clothes of a country gentleman, but to my mind he wears them as though he weren't used to them."

The only stranger in the neighbourhood, a young man of sandy complexion, of silent habits, and with rather sleepy eyes, who had lodgings in the farmhouse close by and was understood to be a schoolmaster taking a prolonged vacation, set down his glass and intervened. He, too, was watching the newcomer with some interest.

"He is asking for some shooting, Farmer Kershaw told me."

"That don't go to prove nothing," the innkeeper declared. "There's many as shoots now out from Norwich and the big towns that don't know one end of the gun from the other. What I say is that it's a queer thing that a man with no friends around, a solitary

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man too, by all accounts, should come and settle in a place like this, and in that particular house too. Mysterious, I call it!"

"I am of the same opinion," Rawson agreed.

"Hold on, you chaps!" the innkeeper enjoined, in a tone of some excitement. "He's coming right in here!"

The pseudo-schoolmaster, whose name was understood to be Fielding, was the only one of the little company who did not show signs of embarrassment as the latch of the door was lifted, the door itself pushed open, and the subject of their conversation made his appearance. The grocer had plunged rather too abruptly into the discussion of some local topic with the butler, and the innkeeper was too taken aback to conceal his astonishment at this unexpected visit. Mr. Johnson, however, was one of those people who carry with them a composing influence and the slight awkwardness was of very short duration.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he greeted them, glancing around with quiet geniality. "I should like a whisky and soda, Mr. Landlord."

"That's right, sir," was the latter's prompt reply, as he turned to his shelf.

"My name is Johnson — Peter Johnson," the newcomer continued, establishing himself in a vacant easy-chair. "I have come to live for a time at the Great House."

"Very glad to welcome you here, sir," Mr. Craske assured him civilly.

"Hope you'll find the place to your liking, sir," Rawson put in.

"I am very much obliged to you all," was the gratified rejoinder. "My first impressions are entirely favourable. I have been a hard worker and I need a

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little rest. So far as I can judge, this seems to me to be a particularly tranquil neighbourhood."

There was for a moment an almost awkward hiatus in the conversation. The innkeeper and the grocer exchanged glances. Rawson coughed.

"It has always been considered so in the past, sir," the latter acknowledged.

"This being my first visit, you gentlemen will perhaps join me," Mr. Johnson invited, as he received his whisky and soda.

Every one accepted the invitation, including the presumed schoolmaster, who had not as yet spoken. Mr. Johnson observed him keenly from underneath his rather heavily lidded eyes.

"Are you a native of these parts?" he enquired.

"I am more or less a stranger," was the somewhat reserved reply. "I, like you, have come down for a little quiet."

"Can't say as your manner of living quiet would altogether suit me," the grocer remarked cheerily. "The young gentleman's a naturalist, sir," he explained, turning to the principal guest of the afternoon. "He goes moth hunting with a net, round the mere side and across to Cranley Swamp at night. That's not a job as would suit every one."

Mr. Johnson was politely interested. The young man smiled in expostulatory fashion.

"I am only an amateur," he confessed, "and I only go out odd nights during the week. I miss my sleep too much."

"You'll not be finding much company in these parts, I'm afraid," the innkeeper observed, making polite conversation with the stranger. "There's not so many of the gentry living round as there used to be."

Mr. Johnson showed signs of interest.

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"Well," he said, "I'm a great reader and I'm fond of the country, so I must make the best of it. Tell me something about my neighbours. Who lives in the long, low house across the way from my garden gate?"

"That's what we do call the Little House, sir," the innkeeper replied. "It belongs to a poor invalid lady, who don't seem to get any stronger. De Fourgenet, her name is — or something like that — she having married a foreigner. But most of the folk round here just call her 'Madame.' She's an English lady but she have lived abroad a great deal. According to her letters she do be some sort of a titled lady, but she don't seem to hold to it herself."

"An invalid, eh?" Mr. Johnson enquired sympathetically.

"They do say, sir, that it's her spine," the grocer confided. "Anyway, she's mostly lying down. Some time ago they took her to one of them French places, but it don't seem to have done her much good."

"Aix-les-Bains, it was," the butler put in. "I've been there with my gentlemen before now. In fact, it was through us, I think, that she went there."

"Did it do her no good at all?"

"Some say it made a difference and some say it didn't," was the doubtful reply. "Anyway, there's a physician comes to see her now once a month, and she has massage regularly from Norwich. It looks as though there were still some hope."

"Is she — er — inclined to be sociable?" her new neighbour enquired.

The grocer shook his head.

"I'm afraid she isn't disposed that way, sir," he declared. "She and the Squire have been great friends all their lives, and he visits her regular, but she don't see none of the other folk round if she can help it."

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"That doesn't sound encouraging," Mr. Johnson commented. "Does she live quite alone?"

"She has a companion," the innkeeper answered — "a Miss Besant. A nice proper-spoken young woman, but keeps herself to herself. There was a niece too — lived at the Great House, she did — but she went away about a year agone and she hasn't been in these parts since."

"As a neighbour," Mr. Johnson confessed, with a little sigh, "Madame appears to be a wash-out. Let's hear about the rest of the folk."

"Well," the innkeeper continued, taking a modest pull at his own tankard, "there do be the vicar, for sure, but he bain't no use to nobody these days. A man more changed than he I never did see."

"A sombre, silent man he is now, surely," the grocer confirmed.

The butler nodded ponderous agreement.

"He used to dine with us once a week regular, but hasn't been near the Hall since — not for eleven months. They say that he never stirs out of his study now."

"I was looking over his garden wall only last night," the innkeeper observed. "It do seem — the whole place — to be going to rack and ruin. And he so proud of his garden, too."

"He has had some sort of a loss, perhaps," Mr. Johnson suggested.

"None as any one knows of," the butler affirmed. "He's a widower and have lived alone ever since he came here. There are some who say that he's had a falling out with the Squire, but if that be so, none of us have heard of it."

"The Squire?" Mr. Johnson repeated hopefully. "And who might he be?"

The butler's manner betokened hurt surprise.

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"The Squire, sir — my master — is Sir Bertram Ballaston of Ballaston Hall."

"An old family?"

"The sixteenth baronet."

Mr. Johnson was properly impressed.

"Any family?" he enquired.

"One son — Mr. Gregory Ballaston. Then the Squire's brother — Mr. Henry Ballaston — lives at the Hall with him," the butler added, after a scarcely perceptible pause. "Not that he's much company for any one, though."

"Indeed," Mr. Johnson murmured. "Is he too a recluse or an invalid?"

There seemed to be a marked disinclination to discuss the inmates of the Hall. The innkeeper looked out of the window, Mr. Craske gazed into his tankard, the young man remained still almost outside the conversation.

"Things up at the Hall," the butler confided, with some reserve, "are not what they used to be. There have come a change over the place."

"A change indeed," the grocer sighed gloomily.

Mr. Johnson sensed reserves and prepared for departure.

"Well, I must be tiring you with all my questions," he declared good-humouredly. "I'm going to ask you one more, though. Is it my fancy, or wasn't this place — Market Ballaston — the scene of some sort of a tragedy some time ago? The name — Market Ballaston — seemed familiar to me directly I read the advertisement, but I couldn't recall what it was. If it was anything serious, it must have been whilst I was abroad."

They all looked at him incredulously. The innkeeper picked up a glass and began to wipe it. The grocer

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coughed nervously. Even the butler seemed at a loss for words.

"You'll excuse us, sir," Mr. Craske said at last. "This is a very small place, of course, and when a thing happens right in the midst of us like what did happen, it seems to us somehow as though the whole world ought to know about it. Still there was a lot of stir — a lot of stir in all the London newspapers."

"I am a careless reader of the newspapers," Mr. Johnson confessed. "Besides which, the last twenty years of my life, up to a few months ago, have been spent, not only abroad, but a very long way abroad. Fill up the glasses, Mr. Innkeeper. I have asked you so many questions that you must allow me to be host once more. Now tell me what it was that happened here."

They all exchanged glances. As though by common but unspoken consent the butler became spokesman.

"There was a very terrible murder committed in this village, sir, just about twelve months ago. A gentleman was killed in the night — shot through the head, he was — and never a trace of the murderer from that day to this."

"Good God!" Peter Johnson exclaimed, properly shocked. "I am beginning to remember something about it."

"It was a gentleman of the name of Endacott, from foreign parts like you," the butler continued, "own brother to Madame at the Little House. He hadn't been here very long, but he was a harmless body and well liked. He had dined with us at the Hall — him and his niece, a very beautiful young lady — her as Mr. Pank spoke of, being also niece to Madame — and it seemed as though we were going to become quite friendly. One morning — there he was — seated at his

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desk where he used to work at nights — shot through the head and stone dead, and a box of papers that was by his side all scattered about anyhow. There was police come from Norwich, and there was police come from Scotland Yard in London, but from that day to this they do seem to have been fairly outwitted."

"What a terrible thing," Mr. Johnson exclaimed. "In a small place like this, too! Where did it happen? Where did you say he lived?"

There was another embarrassed silence. This time it was the grocer who intervened. There was a note of indignation in his tone.

"If the agent as let the property — Mr. Borroughes, I suppose it was — said nothing about it, sir, then there's no doubt he was very much to blame. The murder was committed in the Great House, where you've come to live. Mr. Endacott and his niece were the last tenants."

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CHAPTER II

Mr. Johnson subsided once more into the easy-chair from which he had risen.

"This is most amazing!" he exclaimed. "A murder in the Great House only twelve months ago!"

"It do seem most unaccountable, sir," the grocer ventured, "that you never heard about it."

"I was abroad at the time and until a month or so ago," Mr. Johnson explained, "and it is astonishing how you lose touch with things altogether after a while. I sometimes didn't open an English newspaper for a week at a time. — Well, well," he went on, "perhaps that's the reason why they asked such an extraordinarily low rent for the house."

"It's a-many," the innkeeper observed, "who wouldn't live there rent free — not that I'm saying that any educated person ought to take notice of such," he added hastily. "It's a fine house and the gardens are grand, and I only hope, sir, that you'll be comfortable and not be put off, so to speak, by a thing that's passed and gone."

"And you say that the police have never even made an arrest," Mr. Johnson asked incredulously. "Surely that's a very unusual thing in this country?"

"Unusual it may be," the innkeeper admitted, "but a fact it is, all the same. For weeks afterwards we had gentlemen from Scotland Yard almost living in the place. One stayed here in this very inn and the questions he did ask were surely ridiculous. But there wasn't one of them clever enough to find out who killed Mr. Endacott."

The new tenant of the Great House finished his drink in silence and rose to his feet.

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"Well, gentlemen," he observed, "I strolled in here to make friends with any of my new neighbors who might be around and make acquaintance with the place, so to speak, but I certainly didn't expect to hear anything like this."

"It's a bad start, I'm afraid, sir," the innkeeper regretted civilly, "but you'd have been bound to have heard of it before long."

"Such a stir it did make," the grocer reflected. "Every morning and every afternoon there was a fresh rumour, as you might say."

"But not a single arrest," Mr. Johnson repeated. "Most extraordinary!"

"I hope now that you know the worst as is to be told, sir," Rawson ventured, "that you'll soon settle down here and like the neighbourhood."

Mr. Johnson inclined his head gravely.

"I have no doubt that I shall," he declared. "In many respects the Great House suits me perfectly. It is just the sort of garden I want to have, the neighbourhood seems healthy, and it is not too far from the sea. I wish you good afternoon, gentlemen!"

There was a little chorus of farewells. The new tenant took his departure, swinging his stick and, though naturally a little thoughtful after the news he had heard, there was nothing in his manner to indicate that he intended to take it too seriously to heart. They watched him from behind the muslin curtains until he opened the gate which led into his gardens and disappeared.

"He do seem to me to have plenty of courage, and a proper man for the neighbourhood," the innkeeper pronounced, wiping up his counter. "There is a-many might have been struck all of a heap at being told what we had to tell him."

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"Any sort of tenant is better than none," the grocer sighed, "but a family, I must confess, is what I was hoping for."

Rawson, as became his position, maintained a somewhat dubious attitude.

"I could wish," he observed, with a heavy frown, "that he had given us some indication as to his previous occupation or station in life. His coming in here and sitting down for a drink was friendly-like but not exactly usual. To me he seemed scarcely the sort of man whom the Squire, for instance, would be likely to take a fancy to."

"The Squire be a great gentleman," the grocer said reverently. "There aren't many like him left in these parts. He's not likely to take up with a stranger. Why should he?"

"Why, indeed?" Rawson assented. "Yet he seemed to take quite a fancy to Mr. Endacott. Mr. Gregory, too, paid the young lady quite a lot of attention."

"And no wonder," the innkeeper remarked. "She was a proper-looking young lady. There ain't many in these parts could hold a candle to her for looks. You're not very gay just now at the Hall, Mr. Rawson," he continued.

The butler stifled a regretful sigh. Things at the Hall were a great deal less gay than he was prepared to disclose.

"We're generally pretty quiet during the summer," he admitted. "The Squire was never one for entertaining much before the shooting. I did think that Mr. Gregory being at home might have made a little difference, but he's due, they say, to start for foreign parts at any moment. — Six o'clock, gentlemen. I wish you all good evening."

There was a simultaneous break-up of the little

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party. Rawson, ponderous as ever and grey of complexion, notwithstanding his country life, first made a dignified exit, and, walking a short way down the village street, climbed the stile which led into the park. Mr. Craske crossed the street and returned to the pleasant-looking, creeper-covered establishment behind the long shop windows of which he and his father and grandfather before him had dispensed groceries and gossip for the last hundred years. Finally the young man, Fielding, took his silent departure, mounting a motor bicycle which he had left leaning up against the wall. He glanced at his watch and reflected for a few moments.

"Be going for a ride, Mr. Fielding?" the innkeeper, who had followed him outside, enquired.

The young man looked up and down the sleepy sun-baked street, and glanced at a signboard where the road forked.

"I may get as far as Norwich," he ruminated. "I'm wanting some new flies."

"A pleasant ride and all this evening," the other observed. "Queer it do seem these days to think of getting to Norwich and back afore dark. Them things as you ride have made a power of difference in getting about."

The young man smiled.

"Twenty miles to Norwich," he remarked. "Forty minutes, taking it easy. Yes, I think I shall run over there."

He swung on to his machine, which started at once, and in three quarters of an hour he was writing out a telegram in a post office in Norwich. Afterwards he made a pilgrimage to a sporting emporium in the main street, and with the care of an expert selected a fresh assortment of flies with which to tempt a particularly

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elusive but desirable trout. Eight o'clock was striking as he passed once more through the village street of Market Ballaston on his way back to his farmhouse lodgings. He dismounted outside the Ballaston Arms and stood looking about him with the air of one absorbing to the full the gentle atmosphere of peace, beauty and rustic content.

At the end of the street, a row of houses, mostly of grey stone with deep red tiles, opened out into the little market place, where an ancient covered cross stood in the centre of a cobbled space. On a stone trough three or four youths and two young women were seated in peaceful and almost aggressive silence. Mr. Houghton, the bank manager, was standing on the cool flagged pavement outside his neat little house, smoking a cigarette and chatting with Foulds, the veterinary surgeon, who had just driven up in his little two-seater car, whilst just across the way, Mr. Craske's good-looking daughter had stepped out of the front door to water the row of geraniums in the boxes before the windows. From the Great House, set in somewhat severe isolation behind its encircling red brick wall, came the clamorous summons of a dinner gong, and almost immediately afterwards a similar invitation from the tinkling of Chinese bells sounded from the Little House. The melody from the latter had scarcely died away before, from the Hall, came the slow booming of the alarm bell, rung nightly at the dinner hour.

The young man listened and into his sleepy eyes there crept a speculative expression as they travelled beyond the village street, beyond the park, up the great grass-bordered avenue towards the windows of the Hall. It seemed almost as though he could see into the very stately and undisturbed Jacobean dining room, see the three men who sat together at the end of that desert

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of mahogany, frowned down upon by lines of pictured ancestors, their slightest need anticipated by Rawson and his well-trained subordinates, as though he could hear their languid and stilted efforts at conversation, as though, perhaps, he could see the ghosts behind their chairs. As though, when he swung round a moment or two later, he could see into the more modest but still impressive dining room of the Great House, where Mr. Peter Johnson sat alone, before a far simpler repast, eating and drinking with a frown upon his forehead, and lines about his mouth, no traces of which had appeared during those more genial moments of his afternoon visit to the Ballaston Arms; as though, turning still a little farther round, he could see even into that quaint low dining room of the Little House, take note of the invalid with golden hair and weary brown eyes, who lay upon her long chair, drawn up by the side of the round table, the discontented but earnest young woman who sat opposite to her, the harsh-featured maid, their sole attendant.

In the end he sighed and abandoned his reflections. He entered the inn, disturbing thereby Mr. Pank, the landlord, in the middle of his supper, and drank a glass of gin and tonic. Then the quick explosions of his bicycle disturbed once more the quiet, drowsy street, as he flashed through the village on his homeward way.

Throughout the whole of that long summer day it had scarcely seemed possible that there could be a more peaceful spot in the world than the wide street, the cobbled market place, and the winding country lanes which emptied themselves into the village of Market Ballaston. At three o'clock on the following morning there was not only peace but silence, absolute and complete. The two hundred and forty-three men, women

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and children who made up its inhabitants, had passed into the land of ghosts. Even the houses themselves, with their closed blinds and sightless windows, breathed the very spirit of repose. The chiming of the church clock, notwithstanding its silvery distinctness, seemed to carry with it a note almost of apology to a sleeping world. Silence more complete than ever followed the dying away of its last trembling note. For some time not even an uneasy dog or a too eager denizen of the farmyard ventured to disturb the moonlit pall of silence. Then came the first sign of human movement.

The small postern gate set in the red brick wall which surrounded the Great House was opened noiselessly and Peter Johnson stepped into the lane. He stood there for a moment or two perfectly still, with the air of a man listening — a hopeless task, it seemed, on such a night. Whilst he listened, his eyes wandered up and down the street, away across the churchyard and into the wood behind, past the steeple and over the sleeping country to the horizon. It seemed, however, that if he watched for any unusual sight or listened for any unusual sounds, both efforts were in vain. After a few moments he took another step forward and, with the postern gate still open, stood gazing thoughtfully and watchfully over the medley of red-tiled roofs, up the great avenue beyond, to where the imposing front of the Hall, with its long rows of uncurtained windows, filled the background with a serene and brooding dignity. He stood there perhaps for as long as five minutes, until he seemed to become part of the dreaming landscape, a statue petrified by the moonlight, the only living figure in that drama of repose, all the geniality and kindliness drained somehow from his expression, a sinister and watchful figure, alien and inimical.

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Suddenly he seemed to stiffen. From the outside of a small wood adjoining the Hall flashed a light — little more than a pin-prick of fire, but vivid and distinct. Three times it flashed. Then it disappeared. Peter Johnson, as silently as he had come, stepped back and, vanishing through the postern gate, reëntered his own domains.

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CHAPTER III

Mr. Peter Johnson, on the following morning, was indulging in the harmless occupation of practising mashie shots with a dozen golf balls over some shrubs upon the front lawn of the Great House, when Morton, his newly engaged butler who had arrived a few days before from a registry office at Norwich, sallied through the garden door, followed by a young lady. Mr. Johnson promptly abandoned his diversion and came forward.

"Miss Besant to see you, sir," the servant announced.

Mr. Johnson, without committing himself to speech, exhibited a certain measure of cordiality. He held out a welcoming hand, which, after a moment's hesitation, the girl accepted.

"I must apologise for coming in like this, Mr. Johnson," she said. "Madame De Fourgenet, the lady to whom I am companion, insisted upon it."

"I beg that you will not apologise," was the civil reply. "I am very glad to see you. You are my opposite neighbour then, it seems."

"We live at the Little House," the young lady assented. "For over a year — all the time that the place has been empty, in fact — your gardener, Smith, has been accustomed to assist our one servant for half an hour each day, cutting wood or something of that sort. Madame has the strongest objection to having a stranger in the house, or even in the garden, and she sent me across to ask whether it were possible to make any arrangement by which we could continue to have the services of Smith for that time each day."

Mr. Johnson made no immediate reply. He was ex-

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ceedingly interested in the young lady, and he seemed to be carrying out a line of thought with regard to her. From the moment of her appearance her expression had not changed. Her tone, which was level and indifferent, was the tone of a person who had no concern in what she said; she spoke mechanically, as though choosing the readiest words with the sole object of concluding an unavoidable task. She was tall, inclined to be of full figure, paler than she ought to have been, living in the country, with eyes which seemed seldom fully open, masses of light brown hair brushed back from her forehead, and a mouth whose discontented corners gave to her expression a weary, almost a petulant note. No ordinary person, an admirer of the sex, studying her as she had crossed the lawn, would probably have troubled to look at her again; Mr. Johnson, however, was not an ordinary person. It was one of his gifts to appreciate people for what they were, not for what they seemed to be. He realised that there were certain exceptional characteristics about the young woman who stood waiting for his reply.

"Please don't hesitate to say so," she went on, half turning away, "if you think Madame's request unreasonable. I really don't see myself why you should consent. I am simply the bearer of a message."

"My dear young lady, pray sit down," Mr. Johnson invited, pushing a wicker chair towards her. "Please assure Madame — I fear that her name is a little beyond me — that I should be very glad indeed for Smith to continue to render her the services which he has hitherto performed."

"As to remuneration," she began ——

Mr. Johnson waved his hand.

"Pray settle that with the man himself," he begged. "I shall allow him his half an hour off each day — he

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has an under gardener and can spare the time. It is only a neighbourly action. Anything Madame may choose to give him is no concern of mine."

"You are very kind," she said doubtfully, "but I do not think that Madame will care to accept the man's services in your time without seeing that you are recompensed."

"Make your own arrangements then," he suggested. "The matter is scarcely worth serious discussion."

The young woman rose.

"You are very kind," she repeated. "You must excuse my having come to see you in this informal fashion. It was Madame's desire, and I have to obey orders."

"I will excuse it, my dear young lady," he declared, "on one condition."

"Condition?"

"That you sit down and talk to me for a minute or two."

"Why should I do that?" she asked, with a querulous uplifting of the eyebrows, which he had already noticed were very fine and silky.

"Because we are neighbours," he replied. "Because I have just returned to this country after many years spent abroad, and I am at times lonely. Because I am quite sure that Madame can spare you for half an hour, and because — here is a great idea — if I let you have my gardener for half an hour, why shouldn't Madame, as you call her, let me have her companion for the same length of time?"

She looked at him with mild curiosity. Her self-possession was so marked as to indicate indifference.

"Is it my fancy," she asked, "or are you rather a strange person?"

"I like to talk," he confided. "All my life I have had to live amongst silent people. That is finished.

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Agreeable society is one of the things to which I have looked forward upon my return to England."

"Then why on earth did you come to Market Ballaston?" she demanded, with unexpected vehemence. "You won't find any society here. Why did you come? Why did you choose this place?"

She had without warning adopted an almost inquisitive tone, but his eyes met hers steadily. He seemed to be trying to divine her sudden access of interest.

"I came," he explained, "because I like a large house and gardens, when I can afford them, and this place is very cheap. I had to settle down somewhere, and this neighbourhood is as good as any other. As to the people — well, if there is no one here who wants to be friendly, I must make the best of it. I have been abroad for a great many years, but I have a few friends left who will find me out in time."

The little spark of interest seemed to have entirely died out of her manner.

"I see," she murmured. "The house certainly is a pleasant one. We scarcely expected, though, to see it let so soon."

"Why not?"

"People have ideas. You know the story of the last tenant here?"

"I heard it after I had taken the house," he confided.

She pointed to the library window on the ground floor.

"He was shot one night in the study there," she told him.

"Terrible! And what seems more terrible still, I understand that the murderer was never caught. Surely some one must have been suspected."

The girl shrugged her shoulders. She had accepted

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one of her companion's cigarettes and was smoking lazily and with a certain measure of content.

"I think," she said, "that every one in the village has been suspected, including Mr. Wilkinson the clergyman, myself, every one up at the Hall and all the servants. The hard thing, however, has always been to discover any possible motive."

"Nothing was taken from the room then, I suppose?" he enquired.

"Nothing that could be traced. Nothing apparently of any value. Mr. Endacott had been occupied in the translation of some wonderful Chinese manuscripts at the time the affair happened. The box containing them was upset and the manuscripts were all over the place, but no one could tell if any were missing, or if they were of any real value. Even his niece, Miss Endacott, who ought to have known, had nothing whatever to say."

"What sort of a man was this predecessor of mine?" he asked.

"He had been a great scholar in his day," she answered, a little doubtfully, "but really I only saw him once or twice. Some of the papers called him the greatest living authority on Chinese art and antiquities. He had spent nearly all his life out there."

"Of cheerful disposition?"

"Not very. He was exceedingly reserved and seemed all the time engrossed in his work. He chose this part of the world, I think, to be near Madame, but, considering that they were brother and sister, he saw very little of her."

"And the young lady — his niece?"

"She was very attractive — I suppose you might say beautiful," was the somewhat cold reply. "She left soon after the inquest and hasn't returned yet. She is coming to stay with Madame, I believe, very shortly."

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"A most mysterious affair!" Mr. Johnson reflected. "Yet I dare say, if one knew where to start, the solution would be very simple. Now, supposing, Miss Besant, any one were to offer you the thing you most desired in life to discover who fired that shot, where should you start your investigations?"

She turned her head and looked at him. The sleepy droop of her eyelids had for a moment gone, and he saw that her eyes themselves were beautiful.

"I have not the faintest idea," she assured him. "Nature never meant me for a detective. I have too little imagination."

There was a brief silence. The young lady began to make preparations for departure.

"Tell me," her companion ventured; "now that I am settling down here, I should like to be neighbourly. It is, of course, impossible for Madame to come and see me — would it be possible for me to call upon her?"

"In a general way," she replied, after a moment's hesitation, "I should have told you at once that it was altogether impossible. Madame detests visitors — the outer gate is generally kept locked as a hint — but curiously enough, she has shown the utmost interest in your coming. She will bombard me with questions when I return. Unless what I say satisfies her, it is very possible that she may consent to receive your visit. Although," she added, "you won't get much amusement out of it."

"In any case," he said, "I hope before long that Madame may require some other trifling service and that you will again be her ambassadress."

She left him, vouchsafing only the most casual of farewells, and passing round the corner of the house without a backward glance. Mr. Johnson watched her

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every step. An ordinary young woman without a doubt, wearing ordinary clothes, saying ordinary things, and with an unusual gift for concealment. Yet there was something in her very reticence which had its allurement. Mr. Johnson, who was not a profound psychologist, although he had always understood the men with whom he had had to deal, had a flash of inspiration. She was ordinary, just as she was reticent — because she was, by temperament, or circumstance, intensely self-possessive. He came to the conclusion, as he returned to his unaccustomed pursuit, and fluffed mashie shot after mashie shot, that there existed a Miss Besant at present entirely unrevealed.

At precisely half-past three o'clock that afternoon there occurred what was looked upon almost as a pageant in the village. With great ceremony the very fine gates leading to the Hall were thrown open by the lodge keeper, and, in the small old-fashioned brougham which only left the Ballaston stables three or four times a year, drawn by a couple of dark bay horses, whose sides shone like satin and whose harness glittered from every point of view in iridescent splendour, Mr. Henry Ballaston, on behalf of the family, came to call upon the newcomer at the Great House. From the lodge gates onward the progress of the seldom seen lesser autocrat of the village and neighbourhood was something like a royal procession. The tradesmen hastened to their shop windows to perform their salutes, the roadmender stood, bare-headed, looking downward as one receiving a blessing. The solitary occupant of the brougham sat with expressionless face, his hand raised all the time to his hat. It was impressive and distinctly a survival.

Arrived at the somewhat inhospitable-looking gates

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of solid oak which formed the entrance to the Great House, the footman sprang to the ground and drew from its resting place amongst the ivy the knob of the seldom-used bell. The gates were thrown open. Morton received the visitor at the front door and escorted him to where his master lay stretched in a basket chair under a cedar tree at the farthest corner of the lawn.

"Mr. Henry Ballaston, sir," he announced.

Peter Johnson stumbled to his feet and Henry Ballaston removed his hat in courtly and formal salute. He was strangely dressed for the country, in a black cut away coat and grey checked trousers. The shape of his collar belonged to a past generation. He wore a black satin tie folded over and secured by a pearl pin, a bowler hat carried now in his hand, and grey suède gloves.

"You are, I presume," he said, withdrawing the glove from his right hand before extending it, "our new neighbour, Mr. Johnson. I have called on behalf of my brother and myself for the purpose of welcoming you to this neighbourhood."

Mr. Johnson took the outstretched hand and released it almost at once. Here was a man, he decided, after his own heart — a man difficult to read, of immense reticences.

"It is very kind of you to come," he said. "I am sure I scarcely expected it. I have been given to understand that neither you nor your brother pay many visits."

"I am afraid," Henry Ballaston assented, accepting the chair which Morton had brought out, "that we are both a little neglectful of our duties in that respect. You are so near a neighbour, however, that I permitted myself the pleasure of devoting a spare half-hour to making your acquaintance."

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"Very kind of you, I am sure," Mr. Johnson repeated. "Fine old property, yours."

"Ballaston Hall has many points of interest," the other admitted. "I trust that we may soon have the pleasure of seeing you there. My brother," he added, with a little sigh, "finds many calls upon his time. He is Chairman of the Quarter Sessions, Lord Lieutenant of the County, and he takes some interest in the political activities of our Member. He is, furthermore, Master of the Hounds here, as I dare say you know. He desired me to say, however, that he should look forward to the pleasure of making your acquaintance. — You yourself are agreeably housed here."

"I like the place," its tenant admitted. "In many respects it suits me admirably."

"I find it interesting and also laudable," Henry Ballaston observed — "as no doubt do many other of your neighbours — that you were not deterred from taking up your residence here on account of the tragedy — the unfortunate accident — which befell the late owner of the house."

Mr. Johnson looked for a moment steadily across the iron fence close to which they were seated. It was a typically restful summer afternoon. From the distance came the soothing sound of a grass-cutting machine. There was a murmur of bees amongst the roses, the faintest rustle of west wind amongst the shrubs. All the time those cold blue eyes watched him. There was no sign of anxiety or even of interest in Henry Ballaston's expressionless face. His attitude remained stiff and formal. His eyes never wavered in their steadfast gaze.

"I was not told of the incident to which you refer," Mr. Johnson confided, "until after I had signed the contract. But, in any case, I don't know that it would

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have made any difference. The quiet of this place soothes me. To one who has lived a busy life in foreign cities, there is a great attraction in the peaceful outlook of a village like this."

"That is easily comprehensible," Henry Ballaston admitted judicially. "Still there are many country places with attractions more obvious than Market Ballaston can offer. Golf links in the immediate vicinity, for instance; shooting or hunting."

"That may be so," the other agreed. "My life, however, has been too busy a one to cultivate any taste for such things. I understand there are excellent golf links in the neighbourhood, if later on I find it necessary to seek amusement outside my gardens. Shooting, after a fashion, I have at times indulged in. I gather, however, that there is none to let within reasonable distance."

"No Ballaston shooting has been let for many years," was the somewhat stiff reply. "From what part of the world, might I ask, Mr. Johnson, do you come?"

"From all quarters of it. I am by birth an American, but I have travelled a great deal of recent years. The English life is almost unknown to me. It is, perhaps, for that reason that I appreciate these surroundings."

Henry Ballaston nodded gravely.

"I trust," he said, "that you will find all your expectations realised. It is a surprise to me," he added, "to learn that you are of American birth. Your accent would not betray the fact."

"I left America," Mr. Johnson explained, "when I was nineteen years old, and I have only once returned to New York. Since then I have learned to speak many languages. My business has required it. As regards the tragedy to which you have alluded," he went on,

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after a momentary pause, "although having settled here I shall not allow myself to be disturbed by it, I will confess that the story I was told last evening of the murder in my library was rather a shock. Abroad we have always had a very high opinion of the British detective service. It seems incredible that in a small place like this such a crime should remain undetected."

"It is, I believe," was the cold admission, "a circumstance without precedent."

"I gather that no clue or motive of any sort has been discovered?" Mr. Johnson persisted. "From all that one can hear, the murdered man appears to have been an entirely harmless individual and his belongings not in the least likely to attract the ordinary type of criminal."

"There are other of your neighbors," Henry Ballaston surmised, with marked aloofness, "who can tell you much more of the affair. So far as I am concerned, it remains only an unpleasant memory. — We hope very much — my brother and I — Mr. Johnson, that you will give us the pleasure of your company at luncheon at the Hall."

"You are very kind, I am sure."

"If agreeable to you, and if you will pardon the short notice, we will say to-morrow at one o'clock," the visitor suggested, rising. "My nephew is at home for a short time before proceeding abroad. Otherwise we shall be alone. — Once more, Mr. Johnson, I bid you welcome and trust that you will derive all the pleasure you anticipate from your residence here."

The tenant of the Great House, a little speechless, escorted his visitor to the front entrance before which the carriage was waiting. At their approach a footman threw open the door of the brougham, the coachman sat up in his seat, the horses, fretted from the

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flies, pawed the gravel. Henry Ballaston, with a formal bow of farewell, took his seat and, with the sun glittering upon the silver of the harness and the brightly polished, shiny top of the brougham, this visit of ceremony was brought to an end.

Back through the village street, with eyes looking this time neither to the right nor to the left, through the lodge gates, where his hand sought the brim of his hat in mechanical salute to the curtesying doorkeeper, along the winding avenue, and through the iron gates up to the great front of the Hall, Henry Ballaston passed on his return journey and finally reached his destination. He entered the cool, lofty hall, handed his hat and gloves to the footman who was waiting, and hesitated for a moment. The door of the library was unexpectedly opened. Sir Bertram strolled out as though by accident.

"Well, my dutiful brother?" he asked, his tone, though apparently careless, betraying an underlying anxiety.

Henry waited until he had reached his brother's side.

"The man appears to be perfectly harmless," he confided. "He will take lunch with us to-morrow."

"Good!" Sir Bertram approved. "I shall go and change now. I am going to have a few sets of tennis with Gregory."

Henry Ballaston crossed the hall and, passing through the library, entered the smaller room which had been devoted to his use. Gregory in flannels and with a tennis racket under his arm, was apparently engaged in examining one of the catalogues. He turned around as his uncle entered.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "You back already!"

"My call I thought was of suitable length," was the measured rejoinder.

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"What sort of a fellow is this new tenant of ours?" Gregory demanded.

His uncle paused for a moment. Gregory's fingers were nervously tapping the vellum-bound manuscript which he held.

"A very ordinary sort of person," he pronounced, "who appears to have found his way here entirely by accident."

Gregory replaced on the shelf the catalogue which he had been studying. He failed to notice that he had been holding the volume upside down.

"Good of you to do the duty stunt, Uncle Henry," he observed.

"It has always been one of my few obligations," was the quiet reply. "Mr. Johnson is lunching with us to-morrow."

"I sha'n't go over to Cromer until the afternoon then," Gregory announced. "One may as well be civil, and I have rather a fancy to see what the fellow is like."

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CHAPTER IV

At half-past twelve on the following morning Mr. Peter Johnson, dressed in a blue serge suit and patent shoes — a costume which, after much deliberation, he deemed suitable for the enterprise on which he was bent — mounted his two-seated car, drove through the village, exchanging polite greetings with one or two of his recent acquaintances, and, after a moment's wait at the lodge gates, proceeded at a subdued pace along the winding road which crossed the park and up through the great avenue to the front entrance of the Hall. He left his automobile in a secluded place and found the door open as he mounted the steps. Rawson, unrecognising, stony of face and feature, took his name. A footman relieved him of his hat and gloves. Another subordinate, lurking in the background, threw open the door of the library, into which the visitor was ushered.

"Mr. Johnson," the man announced.

Henry Ballaston came forward and greeted his guest with punctilious cordiality. Then he turned to his brother who had been lounging on the hearth-rug, reading a newspaper, but who now came forward with outstretched hand.

"This is my brother, Sir Bertram Ballaston — Mr. Johnson, our new tenant at the Great House."

The two men shook hands; Mr. Johnson a little formally; his host with an indifferent but pleasant courtesy. Sir Bertram had grown somewhat thinner, perhaps, during the last twelve months of ever increasing financial anxiety. His eyes seemed a trifle sunken and the weariness of his mouth was a little more pronounced. His smile, however, as he unbent, was as ingratiating as ever and his voice as insinuating.

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"I am very glad to have this opportunity of meeting you, Mr. Johnson," he said. "You will excuse my having commissioned my brother to represent the family. I happened to be engaged for some days and we were anxious not to delay making your acquaintance."

"Your brother was very welcome," was the prompt assurance. "Very kind and neighbourly of you to look me up at all. I am a complete stranger here and, I may add, to England."

"Indeed," Sir Bertram murmured civilly. "Might one enquire then, whilst congratulating ourselves upon your choice, what made you select this particular part of the world for your abode?"

"Every one seems to ask me that question," Mr. Johnson observed. "I imagine there was a certain amount of chance about it. I wished to settle down in England for a time and from all I had heard I thought Norfolk the most suitable locality. I went to an agent in Norwich, found this house at what I considered a very low rental and established myself."

"And why not indeed?" Sir Bertram demanded approvingly. "For any one who wishes to live a really retired life amongst rural surroundings a better choice could scarcely be made. — I am afraid, Mr. Johnson, that we cannot offer you anything in the way of a modern apéritif. If a glass of Amontillado sherry pleases you I think that you will find this drinkable. My father was reputed to be a judge."

Rawson, who had entered with a tray, poured out three glasses from a bottle reclining in a cradle, with something approaching reverence in his manner. Mr. Johnson accepted the sherry and drank wine such as he had never tasted before. Just as he was setting the glass down, the door opened and Gregory entered. He

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came forward with all his father's grace but a little more impetuously.

"This is my son Gregory," Sir Bertram announced. "Mr. Johnson, Gregory — our new tenant."

Gregory's expression, as he had advanced to meet his father's guest, had been one of polite but somewhat indifferent curiosity. He suddenly stopped short, however. The light of amazed recognition flashed in his eyes. For a brief period of time he was absolutely speechless.

"I am happy to meet you," Mr. Johnson said.

Gregory's hand for a moment sought his throat. The blank look of non-recognition in the face of this suave, smooth-faced man was arresting. Yet such a likeness could scarcely be possible. His brain was still confused, afire with a surge of memories of that still, oily river, the merciless sun, his flesh-biting bonds; afterwards the quiet, cool warehouse, with its pungent odours, its jumble of merchandise, its sombre silences. He became suddenly conscious of his father's surprise, of Henry's questioning frown.

"Surely," he ventured at last, "we have met before?"

Mr. Johnson shook his head slowly.

"Not within my recollection," he acknowledged.

There was another, although a briefer silence, a matter now only of seconds, but intense whilst it lasted. Gregory, looking a trifle dazed, held out his hand. His eyes, however, remained fixed upon the other's face and the wonder had never left them.

"So sorry to seem such an idiot," he murmured politely, "but even now I am a little bewildered. We didn't meet fifteen months ago in China — Wu Ling — the firm of Johnson and Company?"

The visitor shook his head. His smile was good-

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natured, but, to a keen observer, a little sphinxlike. His eyes never wavered.

"You are mistaking me for some one else," he said. "My name is certainly Johnson, but it is not an uncommon one and I am quite sure that this is our first meeting."

"It is my memory which is at fault, then," Gregory observed, relapsing with an effort into his usual self. "Glad to welcome you here, Mr. Johnson. Rawson, am I to be allowed a glass of the sherry? Good! I need it."

Luncheon was served with a certain measured but not ungraceful ceremony. The food was excellent and, although the fact was not alluded to, the guest of the meal, who possessed an instinctive appreciation of such things, realised that he was drinking cabinet hock of an almost extinct vintage. Conversation never flagged, but it was conducted upon a level and in a spirit which were a little difficult to the visitor. There was no attempt at humour or story telling. Even personal reminiscences and questionings of all sorts were eschewed. There were grave remarks about politics, county affairs, the prospects of the forthcoming shooting season. Mr. Johnson ventured to express once more his hope of renting a little shooting himself.

"I am afraid," his host regretted, "that such a thing is out of the question for the moment. The Ballaston shooting extends for some distance in every direction, and I do not allow my tenant farmers to concede their sporting rights. We shall, of course, be happy for you to shoot with us, whenever you feel inclined, but from the point of view of sport I fear that you have chosen a somewhat unfavourable neighbourhood. I speak of the immediate present. In the near future there may be changes."

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"The matter does not greatly concern me," was the equable reply. "I have shot birds and beasts in different places, but I do not pretend to be a sportsman. I shall find a great deal of occupation in my garden, in country walks and motoring."

"I was telling my son this morning," Sir Bertram observed, "that I consider our agent, Mr. Borroughes, was very much to blame for not having told you the inner history of the Great House before you took it."

"It would, perhaps, have been better," Mr. Johnson admitted. "At the same time it would have made no difference to my plans. Were you, by-the-by, personally acquainted with my unfortunate predecessor?"

"We had exchanged some few civilities," Sir Bertram replied. "Our acquaintance, however, was nothing but that slight affair which exists between neighbours. But for the unfortunate tragedy which occurred we should probably have become more intimate. Mr. Endacott happened to be a brother of an old friend of mine — the Comtesse de Fourgenet, who resides at the Little House. It was for that reason, I imagine, that he elected to settle down in this neighbourhood."

"There was a niece," Mr. Johnson ventured.

"A very charming young person," Sir Bertram conceded. "She naturally enough left the neighbourhood very soon afterwards. I understand, however, that she is expected shortly on a visit to the Little House."

Luncheon drew towards its close. A very wonderful port was served and drunk, after preliminary encomiums, in respectful silence. Sir Bertram rose to his feet.

"We shall find cigars and coffee in the library, Mr. Johnson," he said. "If I cannot persuade you to drink another glass of wine we might, perhaps, rise."

The four men left the room together. The guest of

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the morning, on his way across the hall, looked about him with an interest which was entirely genuine, for in his way he was a lover of beautiful things. Gregory drew his attention to a famous picture opposite the foot of the staircase and detained him until they became temporarily detached from the others. After a casual reference, indifferently voiced, to a world-famous old master his tone suddenly changed. It was intense, curiously vibrant.

"I must ask you once more," he said quietly, — "I must ask you this — Mr. Johnson. Do you remember a man — a brave fellow he was — who used to trade up the Yun-Tse River amongst the villages? Wu Ling, they called him."

"Wu Ling?" Mr. Johnson repeated. "A Chinaman?"

"He passed as such," Gregory admitted. "He might have been anything. His name even might have been Johnson."

The tenant of the Great House smiled tolerantly.

"Wu Ling," he commented, "is a very nice name. On the whole I prefer it to my own. Mine is and always has been Johnson — Peter Johnson — Peter Johnson of New York."

Gregory led the way towards the library. It seemed to him that there was nothing more to be said.

"Sorry," he apologised. "I am pretty good at faces, as a rule, and I never thought I could make a mistake about this one. Glad to hear you are a neighbour, Mr. Johnson. We shall find the others in here."

He threw open the door of the library and ushered in his companion. His father and uncle were talking together with their coffee cups in their hands. They abandoned their conversation precipitately as the door opened.

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"I was afraid," Sir Bertram said, "that Gregory was commencing to show you the pictures. You would find that rather a lengthy undertaking."

"An undertaking which would interest me very much," Mr. Johnson declared. "I understand that one day a week visitors are permitted to see over the Hall. I shall venture to present myself with the crowd."

"There is no necessity for you to do anything of the sort," Sir Bertram assured him. "My housekeeper will be glad to show you over at any time. Some of the paintings in the gallery are generally considered to be quite worth inspection, and our tapestries are famous. The chapel has a screen which, personally, I think the most beautiful in Norfolk. Perhaps you would care to see it after you have drunk your coffee."

"I should like to very much," Mr. Johnson confessed.

Sir Bertram remained a courteous but reserved host, Henry, with strenuous effort, imparting now and then a note of greater intimacy to the conversation. Gregory remained silent though restless. After they had finished their coffee, they glanced at some of the tapestries and Sir Bertram led the way towards the chapel. They passed through the smaller library which Henry claimed as his own.

"This is my little sanctum," he announced. "My brother leaves most matters connected with the estate in my charge, and this is where I deal with them before they pass on to Mr. Borroughes."

The visitor looked curiously around the lofty but somewhat severe apartment, with its neatly arranged shelves of catalogues, its piles of volumes of reference, its letter cases and many evidences of business detail. An exceptionally large writing table filled the window recess, on which stood a single bronze statue, several curios, a blotter and a massive stationery rack. On

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the right-hand side the window panelling took a wide, inward sweep, leaving a space, half platform, half pedestal. In the centre stood a fine china bowl, filled with deep red roses; on either side — the Body and the Soul.

Mr. Johnson gazed first at one of the Images, then at the other, speechless, expressionless, but absorbed. All the cynical vice and grotesque wickedness of the one leered at him from the left-hand side of those drooping roses; from the right the kindly benevolent face of a saint seemed to breathe out a strange atmosphere of peace and sanctity. Mr. Johnson made no comment, attempted no criticism, yet his very silence was in its way suggestive.

Gregory watched him with eager interest, conscious of a surging resurrection of certain vague, far-fetched suspicions.

In the background Henry Ballaston, though his face showed no sign of emotion, also watched. It was his movement which dispelled those few seconds of paralysed silence. His voice, always a pleasant one notwithstanding its formal note, was softer and lower even than usual, but there was a curious glint in his cold blue eyes.

"You find our miniature Buddhas interesting, Mr. Johnson?" he asked.

The tenant of the Great House did not at first appear to hear him. His eyes were fixed almost to rigidity.

"Both here!" he muttered. "Both!"

The effect of his exclamation was disconcerting. His three companions closed in a little upon him. There was something menacing about their silence.

"Both?" Sir Bertram repeated at last, with the air of a puzzled man.

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Mr. Johnson appeared to awake from his lethargy.

"Say, it seems to me," he remarked, lapsing into his first Americanism, "that those two ought to be worth a great sum of money. I've seen photographs of them when I was travelling in the East. They were stolen from a temple, somewhere in China, I think it was. Miniature Buddhas, aren't they?"

"Stolen!" Sir Bertram murmured.

"Stolen!" Gregory echoed.

"This is very interesting," Henry declared. "They came into our possession in a somewhat unusual fashion. You think that in the first instance they were probably stolen?"

Mr. Johnson withdrew his eyes from them at last.

"I should say they surely were," he agreed. "I saw a photograph of them in an American magazine about twelve months ago, with a gigantic Buddha between them. They were quoted as having been stolen and being for some reason or other, which I have forgotten, immensely valuable. Columns of it there were, I remember. The young American who started out to get them was discovered with his throat cut in the train from Pekin southwards. Nobody seemed to know what had become of the Images."

There was a brief silence; a sudden, almost unaccountable lessening of the tension of the last few minutes. Mr. Johnson loomed no longer as a sinister figure of fate.

"The circumstances under which we came into possession of these Images," Henry intervened, "would seem to preclude the idea of their being the ones referred to in your magazine article. Still, the story is interesting."

Mr. Johnson turned away without further comment. The subject of the Images was exhausted. The screen

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in the chapel beyond was inspected. Presently he took a formal leave of his hosts.

"We shall hope to see more of you, Mr. Johnson," Sir Bertram said, as he accompanied him on to the terrace. "We do not entertain much at present, but my son will be giving some farewell shooting parties before his departure abroad. We shall hope to number you amongst our guests."

"Very kind of you, I am sure," Mr. Johnson replied, climbing into his car and thrusting in his clutch. "My visit and brief glimpse of your treasures has been most enjoyable. Good day, Sir Bertram. Good day, gentlemen."

He drove off. They stood watching him pass through the iron gates into the park. Sir Bertram waved his hand light-heartedly, but neither of the other two indulged in any farewell salute.

"An ordinary sort of fellow, but harmless, I believe," Sir Bertram pronounced.

"There were moments when I thought otherwise, but on the whole I am inclined to agree with you," Henry conceded, after a moment's reflection.

Gregory's thoughts were too confused for speech. He watched the car until it became a speck in the distance. Then he turned away and followed the others into the house.

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CHAPTER V

THE afternoon was still young when Mr. Johnson passed through the park gates of Ballaston Hall and drove slowly down the village street on his way back to the Great House. He studied the sign-post which marked the road to Norwich and hesitated. At that moment a young woman stepped out of the grocer's shop and, recognising him, nodded in spiritless fashion. Mr. Johnson fancied that he caught an almost wistful expression as she glanced critically at his car. He drew up by the side of the cobbled pavement.

"Good afternoon, Miss Besant," he said.

"Good afternoon," she rejoined, looking up as though surprised.

"I thought of motoring in to Norwich," he continued. "I wonder whether you would care to come? It will take three quarters of an hour to an hour and I need not stay there for many minutes."

"It sounds delightful," she admitted, "but I am afraid that it is quite impossible. Madame is very restless to-day and I am quite sure that she would not allow it."

"You might ask her," he suggested.

She hesitated.

"I might," she agreed doubtfully, "but I am afraid it would be scarcely worth while asking you to wait."

"Nonsense. I have nothing to do," he replied cheerfully. "Jump in and I'll drive you to the gate."

"I'd rather you waited at the corner," she begged. "I'll come back and tell you, anyway."

Mr. Johnson obeyed instructions. He drew up at the point where a by-road curved around to his own and

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the Little House and on to a chain of rather remote villages, descended and glanced into his petrol tank, lit a cigarette and settled down to wait. In a few minutes Miss Besant reappeared. He was conscious of a measure of disappointment which rather puzzled him when he saw that she was still without gloves or coat. Nevertheless there was a slightly eager expression in her face.

"Madame has surprised me very much," she announced, as she paused by the side of the car. "She seems willing for me to go, but she would like to speak to you first."

"Delighted," Mr. Johnson replied, preparing to alight. "I proposed myself as a visitor yesterday, as you may remember."

The young woman nodded.

"For some reason or another," she confided, "Madame is very curious about you. Directly I mentioned your name and said that you were outside, she told me to fetch you in. Please be careful what you say to her. She is very peculiar and every one humours her. Whilst you are talking I shall get my coat and gloves."

"I'll do my best," he promised her, as he held open the gate. "Don't keep me too long. I can foresee that conversation with Madame will be difficult. I hope she knows that I have lived abroad for a long time and am unused to ladies' society."

"You'll manage all right," she assured him encouragingly.

She opened the front door and led him across the low, almost square hall, oak-panelled to the ceiling and with several strange and, to Mr. Johnson's taste, not yet educated to futurism, extremely bizarre pictures upon the wall. Then she opened another door softly and beckoned him to follow her.

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"This is Mr. Johnson who has come to live at the Great House, Madame," she announced.

She left him then, and Mr. Johnson crossed the room towards the couch. His curiosity concerning Madame rather increased as he bent down to take her unexpectedly beautiful hand. She was lying flat on her back in a sort of invalid chair, which was drawn up, as usual, to an open window, and from her waist downwards she was covered by a beautiful Chinese wrap of light texture. He was astonished by the lack of wrinkles in her face, the clearness of its complexion, the absence of any sign of illness. A lace scarf around her neck was fastened by an exquisite pin with ancient paste gems, and the fingers of the hand which still remained in his seemed ablaze with jewels, all of them with old-fashioned settings, which contained, however, some really fine gems.

"So you are my new neighbour," she remarked abruptly.

Her voice gave Mr. Johnson further cause for surprise. It was very low and very musical, but it possessed other qualities which he found it difficult to define.

"I have come to live at the Great House for a time," he replied.

"Why have you come here?" she demanded.

He accepted the chair to which she had pointed imperiously.

"It is a most extraordinary thing," he said, "but every person I have met since I came here has asked me the same question. Why should I not choose to come and live a quiet life in Market Ballaston? The place pleased me. I wished to live in the country — in Norfolk for choice — the house and the surroundings were just what I wanted."

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"I don't believe a word you're saying," she declared shortly.

Mr. Johnson, himself something of an adept in the art of guarded conversation, was taken thoroughly aback. For a moment he could think of nothing to say.

"Why do you want to come and live in a house in an out-of-the-way village like this — a house, too, in which another man was murdered? Do you wish me to believe that it was chance, or, perhaps, morbid curiosity, or had you another reason?"

"My dear madame," Mr. Johnson assured her, "as to morbid curiosity, not a soul even mentioned the matter to me till after I had paid over the contract deposit and secured the lease of the house."

"Never mind whether they mentioned it or not," she persisted, her fine eyes challenging his. "Do you mean to tell me that you didn't know about it?"

Mr. Johnson, thoroughly on his guard now, adopted a soothing tone.

"How could I?" he expostulated. "I am a complete stranger to this neighbourhood, and, as a matter of fact, I have spent most of my life abroad."

"The man who was murdered," she continued — "you know he was my brother — had also lived abroad. Had you met him?"

"Coincidences are scarcely likely to multiply themselves," he remarked drily. "I hail from New York and your brother, I understand, had spent most of his life in China."

She lay quite still for a moment, her hands clasped. She seemed to be considering.

"There is an idea here," she recommenced abruptly, "that you are either a detective or that you have come here determined, for some reason of your own, to solve

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the mystery of my brother's murder, that you knew all about it before you came, that you took the house on purpose. What about that?"

Her eyes seemed to be trying to bore their way through to the back of his head. Mr. Johnson remained imperturbable.

"My dear lady," he protested, "I can assure you that this is a foolish fancy."

She had raised herself a little, and she sank back now amongst the cushions. The hard insistence had gone from her eyes but she was still uneasy.

"I hope," she said, "that you are speaking the truth. I hope you are."

"Mr. Endacott," he reflected, "was, as you have just reminded me, your brother."

"He was," she admitted.

"Then why," he asked, "do you feel so strongly upon the matter? I mean, supposing I were a detective — which I am not — or an amateur criminologist, or anything of that sort, bent upon discovering the secret of the crime at the Great House; surely you should welcome my efforts. Why not?"

A gleam of horror lit her eyes.

"You know nothing about it," she cried. "It is not a matter for any one to meddle with. Ralph was my brother, it is true, but he is dead and there is an end of it. I am his nearest surviving relative. It is for me to say. It is for no one else. If any one dares to interfere they shall suffer."

Once more she sank back, exhausted, amongst her pillows. Mr. Johnson bent over her with the air of a doctor soothing a refractory patient.

"My dear neighbour," he begged, "please believe that I am here for no evil or malicious purpose whatsoever. Under no circumstances should I ever take any

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course likely to bring distress upon you. I am not at all the sort of person you think I am."

"I trust not," she acknowledged a little wearily. "Have you taken a fancy to my companion?"

"I wouldn't go quite so far as that," he answered, smiling, "but I must confess that I find her a very pleasant young person. I was just off alone to Norwich and I thought that the ride there might amuse her."

"Very well," Madame decided, "you can take her. Come in and see me again some time. Come as often as you like. I am not altogether satisfied about you. I wish I were."

The door was quietly opened, and Miss Besant appeared, dressed for her excursion. Madame waved her hand in a little gesture of dismissal.

"Is there anything I can do for you before I go?" the young woman asked.

"Nothing," was the curt reply. "It will take you, I suppose, an hour to go to Norwich, an hour to frivol there, and an hour to return. See that you do not exceed that time."

"Very good, Madame."

"And Mr. Johnson!"

"Madame," he answered, looking back from the door.

"Come and see me to-morrow about the same time, unless you are engaged. If so, find out from Miss Besant what time will suit me. That is all. Good afternoon."

Mr. Johnson followed his companion across the hall and out into the street. He was feeling a little dazed.

"Madame," he remarked, "has a great deal of character, and also vivacity, for an invalid."

The girl remained silent. She climbed into the car with a little murmur of pleasure.

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"Madame," she declared, settling herself down contentedly, "is very much stronger than she used to be. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if she recovered altogether, and then she won't need a companion any longer."

Mr. Johnson swung round the corner with the skill of a practised driver.

"In that case," he observed, "my sympathies are divided."

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CHAPTER VI

Mr. Johnson found plenty of time during the journey to Norwich to exchange remarks with and take notice of his companion. The sulkiness of her expression lightened considerably with the pleasure of the rapid motion, the sense of freedom springing from this unexpected holiday. The road wound its way between hedges from which the late honeysuckle still drooped, through a tract of pleasant and varied country; corn fields where harvesting machines with their musical mechanism were at work, rich meadows where the cows stood knee-deep in flower-starred herbage, across a great common where clumps of heather and gorse stretched away to the borders of a thick, encircling wood. The Ballaston pheasants strutted about on every side. From a slight rise in the road a mile or so beyond the village they caught a glimpse of the back of the Hall.

"I lunched there to-day," Mr. Johnson confided.

The girl looked at him curiously.

"Who was there?" she enquired.

"Only Sir Bertram and his son and Mr. Henry Ballaston. I thought it was rather decent of them to ask me."

She made no reply.

"Do you know them?" he asked.

"I see Sir Bertram often," she replied. "He comes down to the Little House two or three times a week when he is here."

"And Mr. Henry?"

"Mr. Henry does not visit Madame to my knowledge."

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"Do you know Sir Bertram's son, Gregory?" he continued.

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were quite wide open now and he was once more astonished to find how beautiful they were. Nevertheless their expression at that moment was not pleasing. She seemed surprised at his question — if such a thing were possible, a little frightened.

"I know him, of course," she replied. "He too visits Madame occasionally."

"I am interested in the family," Mr. Johnson confessed, "and I have faith in your instincts. What do you think of Gregory Ballaston?"

"What should I think of him?" she answered indifferently. "A good-looking young man, run after at times by all the young women in the county, a great sportsman, a great traveller, and, I suppose, a great libertine. How on earth should I, Madame's companion, know or think anything about him?"

"One forms impressions," he murmured.

"If I allowed myself to form any," she rejoined, "they would be favourable. He treats me always just a little more politely, because I am a dependent. If I were a silly girl, I dare say I should be like the rest of them in this horrible neighbourhood."

"Why do you call it that?" he protested.

"I call it that," she rejoined, "because I detest nearly all the people I know in it."

"Well, there don't seem to be many," he remarked good-humouredly, "even if you include me."

"I certainly do not include you," she assured him. "You may disappoint me like the others, but at the present moment you seem to me a very simple, good-natured person, who actually takes the trouble to go out of his way to do a kindness."

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"Not in the least," he protested. "You're not suggesting, I hope, that there is any kindness in driving you to Norwich?"

"Why not?" she retorted. "What else can it be?"

"It is certainly pleasanter for me," he pointed out, "to have you by my side than to go alone."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Why?" she demanded. "I am not good-looking. I am not agreeable. I am not amusing. If you are fond of gallivanting — well, I am sure that you have sense enough to know that it doesn't appeal to me. How can I possibly, therefore, be of any interest to you?"

He smiled.

"You're all there with the words," he acknowledged. "I rather depend upon feelings. I only know that I feel it pleasanter to have you where you are than to be alone. As a matter of fact, there are several of those glib statements of yours I could quarrel with if I wished."

"Well?"

"Your manner," he admitted, "is rather difficult. No one could call you particularly amiable. As to not being attractive, however, I differ from you. I think if you took the slightest trouble about yourself — put your hat on straight, for instance, gathered up those wisps of hair, and indulged in a smile now and then — you would be distinctly good-looking."

For a moment her frown seemed even a little more sullen than ever. There was a positive scowl upon her face, until to his amazement, she suddenly burst out laughing. He saw then that she had the whitest of teeth and the little flush of colour which had been gradually finding its way into her cheeks completely dispelled the sallowness of her complexion. Her eyes

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seemed to reflect her unexpectedly kindled sense of humour. She straightened her hat and felt her hair.

"You really are a very nice person," she said. "You can go on talking nonsense, if you want to. I rather like it. And if it will give you any satisfaction, I will spend that hour during which you are going to leave me alone in Norwich, at the hairdresser's."

"I knew I was right," he declared. "You're a good sort."

"So are you," she rejoined. "Let's be friends. I am going to start by asking you a question."

"For God's sake," he begged, "don't ask me why I came to settle at Market Ballaston."

"Why not?"

"Because every one's pestering me to death with the same thing," he complained. "No one can get that murder out of their heads. It seems to have absorbed every effort at individual thought in the whole place. Why, I've seen men killed by the dozen. I've lived in a place where there was a murder every day. Yet here they seem obsessed by their one little tragedy. I can never get away from it. I go down to the village inn. The tradespeople are just like the tradespeople in any other village. I should like a little local information and gossip. Not a bit of it. The murder, and nothing but the murder! I lunch at the Hall. Before I have been there half an hour I know that I am an object of suspicion. I must have come to the neighbourhood because of the murder. Hang it all, in self-defense I shall have to set to work and find out who *did* kill this fellow Endacott, and tell you all about it."

"I hope you won't try," she begged earnestly.

"Another mystery!" he exclaimed. "What the mischief can it matter to you?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't care much

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about any of these people, but I don't like unhappiness. The man's dead. I think all over the village the same feeling exists. I think they are afraid of what might happen if the truth really came to light."

She leaned a little forward in the car, her eyes fixed upon the steeple of the Cathedral, slowly emerging to definite form, slender, exquisite, yet dominating, as it rose from amongst an incongruous mass of red-tiled buildings. Mr. Johnson waited for several moments. Then, as he swung into the main road, he broke the brief silence.

"That's queer," he confided. "I had formed the same impression myself. Anyway, we will drop it for the present."

She nodded assent.

"I wonder if you realise," she said, "what a great holiday this is for me. I have never been in Norwich. I have not been in a car for years. I am enjoying myself thoroughly, and I am not going to think of another disagreeable thing. Please put me down wherever you like and when you have done your business, I will meet you wherever you say."

"Have you any shopping to do, beyond your visit to the hairdresser?" he asked her.

"Shopping!" she repeated scornfully. "Why should I have any? Living the sort of life I do, one needs no clothes. One thing does as well as another. Still, the hairdresser will take a little time, and I can amuse myself very well looking at the shop windows."

"I shall put you down in the market place," he decided. "I shall be gone for about three quarters of an hour. At the end of that time I will meet you at the tea shop you can see on our right hand. After that, if we have any time to spare, we will look round the place together. Is that agreed?"

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"Delightful!" she assented.

The Chief Constable was in and happy to see Mr. Johnson. He was an amiable ex-officer, as competent as could be expected, and exceedingly popular in the county, of which he was a native.

"I am Major Holmes," he announced, glancing at the card which he still held in his hand. "What can I do for you, Mr. Johnson?"

"Give me a little of your time, and a great deal of your patience," was the quiet reply. "I have just come to live in your county at Market Ballaston. I have taken the Great House there."

"The Great House," the other repeated reminiscently. "Oh, yes, I remember, of course. So you are living there. The scene of a very unfortunate tragedy which cost us a lot of time and trouble lately."

"So I hear," Mr. Johnson murmured.

Major Holmes leaned back in his chair.

"I am afraid," he confessed, "that Norfolk has added to the somewhat scanty list of undiscovered crimes. We don't lay it too much to heart, however, as Scotland Yard took the whole business out of our hands in the early stages."

"A little unwise of them, perhaps," Mr. Johnson observed. "Local police may not be so intelligent, but they are at least tenacious, and they often have the better grasp of the situation."

The Chief Constable remained silent. He had his own opinion, but it was not a matter for discussion with an outsider.

"I imagine," his visitor proceeded, "that it would be rather a score for the county police if they were to achieve a success where Scotland Yard has failed."

Major Holmes glanced across at his caller keenly.

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"Have you brought me any information?" he asked.

"Yes," was the laconic reply.

The Chief Constable was startled but eager.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed, sitting up. "You're a welcome visitor. Look here, let me ring for my Superintendent."

Mr. Johnson held out his hand.

"Not for the moment, if you please," he begged. "I would rather say what I have to say to you in confidence. Afterwards, I understand the information must be used in such manner as you think fit."

The other nodded.

"Very well," he agreed.

The tenant of the Great House squared himself up to the desk. He was a different-looking man to the kindly person who had driven Miss Besant over to Norwich.

"Major Holmes," he said, "I shall ask you to consider as private so much of this conversation as does not come under the heading of official information."

"Certainly."

"The murdered man, Endacott, and I were associated in a very large business established in China, Alexandria and New York. We were together for over twenty years. For the last ten years he was my partner. We wound up the business a little over twelve months ago and he brought a great fortune to England."

"You were his partner," Major Holmes repeated in a tone of considerable surprise.

"No one in this neighbourhood knows of my connection with Endacott," Mr. Johnson continued. "I have chosen to keep it secret. Now let me come to the more precise information which I have to offer. A month or so before Endacott left the East, a Chinese temple near Pekin was robbed, and two statues, wooden Images

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they were, with a very peculiar history, were stolen. There were two young men concerned in the robbery — an Englishman and an American. The American got as far as the railway, and, although he was murdered by a band of robbers who boarded the train, one of the Images reached its destination. The Englishman was captured by the priests, and as, by their religion, they are unable to shed blood, he was handed over by them to a notorious river pirate with instructions that he was to be thrown to the alligators. I heard of the affair in a village where I was trading up the Yun-Tse River, rescued him from the pirate and brought him down to the coast. The name of the young man was Gregory Ballaston."

The Chief Constable stared across the table. It was an odd story to hear told in such a matter-of-fact way in the law-abiding city of Norwich.

"Greg Ballaston!" he exclaimed. "Good Lord!"

"Mr. Gregory Ballaston," the narrator continued, "found his Image waiting for him on the steamer, although his friend was dead. The second of the Images, with which the robbers had decamped, came, by means of indirect traffic with them, into my possession. I showed it to Mr. Ballaston in my warehouse. He coveted it. If the old superstition were true, his Image without mine was useless."

"How, useless?" Major Holmes asked, puzzled.

"Because both were supposed to contain, hidden somewhere in their interior, a sacred treasure of jewels accumulated by the priests in the temple. If I attempt to explain the matter more fully, you will think that I am telling fairy stories, so I will content myself by saying that, according to an ancient superstition, credited by many who had knowledge of the affair, and also by these two young men, the possession of one

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Image without the other was useless. Gregory Ballaston left for England, taking his Image. The other, when we wound up the affairs of the firm, was brought home to England by Ralph Endacott, together with a number of old manuscripts from the temple, which had also come into our possession. Up to, at any rate, a few days before his murder, that Image stood in his study, the room where he was found shot. To-day that Image is in Ballaston Hall."

Major Holmes sat for a moment or two without speaking. It was scarcely to be wondered at that his prevailing impressions were of blank incredulity.

"You are telling me a most extraordinary story, Mr. Johnson," he said guardedly.

"The truth is sometimes extraordinary," the other agreed. "You can easily verify, however, the correctness of the main points of my statements. I can give you references, for instance, to my bankers in London, who will assure you that I was the head of the firm in which Mr. Endacott was partner, that I am a man of wealth and reputation, and in a position to know the truth concerning these matters. Gregory Ballaston half recognised me, but as out there I passed as a Chinaman, he is only suspicious. I adopted the garb and speech of the Chinese very early in life, because no confessed European has a chance of trading successfully in the interior of the country. Gregory Ballaston is a young man against whom I have no ill-feeling — in fact, I rather like him — but Endacott was my associate for twenty years and I was responsible for the Image being in his possession. It was arranged between us that, with the help of a friend of his at the British Museum, he should obtain a translation of the documents we had acquired concerning it, and we should then, on my return to England, discuss the possibility of the existence

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of the jewels. I am very certain that in his lifetime he would never willingly have parted with the Image to Gregory Ballaston."

"And you say that that Image is now at Ballaston Hall?" the Major demanded.

"It is there at the present moment," was the unequivocal reply. "I lunched there to-day and saw it, together with the fellow Image which Gregory Ballaston brought home."

The Chief Constable moved uneasily in his chair. The story to which he had listened was barely credible, but there was something very convincing about this rather ponderous man of slow speech and steady eyes.

"You are a stranger in these parts, Mr. Johnson," he said, after a moment's pause. "You probably don't know that the Ballastons are one of our oldest and most prominent county families. Sir Bertram is Lord Lieutenant at the present moment. He hunts the hounds and occupies a great position."

"I am aware of that," Mr. Johnson replied. "I also know, as probably you do, that the family are in great financial straits."

"It comes to this then," the Chief Constable summed up unwillingly. "You are practically accusing young Ballaston not only of theft but of the murder of your late partner, Endacott."

"I have not gone so far as that," the other pointed out. "I have supplied you with a motive for the murder. I have given you information that property belonging to the dead man — equally to me, by-the-by — is now in the possession of the Ballastons."

"But is this Image really of great value?" Major Holmes asked. "Leaving out the other improbabilities, could its possession be considered as a possible incentive for the perpetration of such an atrocious crime?"

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"The jewels supposed to be concealed in the two Images," Mr. Johnson confided, "are estimated, if they exist at all, to be worth anything up to a million pounds. It was Sir Bertram who first heard the story when he was in the Diplomatic Service and *persona grata* at the late Emperor's Court in China. He passed it on to his son, and without doubt the two together planned the expedition."

Major Holmes felt a certain amount of conviction creeping in upon him. It was only his sense of officialdom which enabled him to conceal his growing sense of horror.

"You must forgive me, Mr. Johnson," he begged, "if I accept your story with some reserves. As a man of common sense, I am sure you will see that it has its incredible side, especially when one considers the great position of the Ballastons and the horrible results which must ensue if your story be proved true. By-the-by, didn't I hear that Gregory Ballaston was going abroad again for some years?"

"It is that fact," Mr. Johnson admitted, "which has induced me to pay you this visit instead of pursuing a few investigations myself."

Major Holmes pushed pen and paper across the table.

"Will you write down the address of your bankers," he invited, "to whom I may refer? If you also care to give me a reference to your lawyers or some private person, I must confess that I should proceed with more confidence."

Mr. Johnson acquiesced without hesitation. There was something convincing about the name of the bank and the solicitors, written in his firm handwriting.

"You have no further suggestions to make, I suppose?" the Chief Constable asked.

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"None at all," Mr. Johnson replied, "except that I should much prefer your keeping my intervention in this matter entirely secret for a short time. You will probably place such investigations as you decide to make in the hands of your subordinate who first took charge of the case. If you can arrange to let him pay me a visit at the Great House, I should be glad."

Major Holmes sat for a moment or two in silence.

"Let me see," he reflected, "Cloutson was the man who had the matter in hand before we were overrun by the Scotland Yard people. He is travelling inspector now for the northern part of the county. I shall catch him to-night at Lynn and will have him return at once."

"There is one thing more I should tell you," Mr. Johnson concluded. "It was my intention, before I heard of Gregory Ballaston's impending departure, to deal with this matter myself. I have a young man from a private detective agency stationed down at Ballaston. He watches, however, for one purpose only."

"Unless you have any special reason for not telling me," the Chief Constable suggested, "I think, especially as we are going to act, I had better know what that one purpose is."

"I anticipate at some time or another," Mr. Johnson confided, "a burglarious visit at the Great House from some one at Ballaston. Now that I have discovered that the Image has already been stolen the possibility is not so great, but it is obvious that as yet Gregory Ballaston has not learned the secret of helping himself to the treasure. Now there is one room — an annex to the study — locked and boarded, on the windows of which Miss Endacott has had bars placed. I believed that the Image was in there, but what certainly is there is the coffer of Chinese manuscripts which

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Endacott brought home with him, and which we believed to contain instructions as to the connection between the Images and the treasure. I have examined that room, and, though of course a professional burglar could manage it easily enough, it wouldn't be a simple matter for an amateur to tackle. Still, having gone so far, I expect Gregory Ballaston to make the last effort. That is why my young man watches Ballaston Hall at night."

Major Holmes was a matter-of-fact man of limited vision, and once more he had the sensation of having been plunged into a world of phantasies.

"Chinese manuscripts!" he muttered. "Images! Greg Ballaston! Finest captain Oxford ever had, you know, Mr. Johnson, and captained the Gentlemen two years. It's awfully hard for me to get a coherent grip of this, especially when you sit there and tell me that you lived in the East disguised as a Chinaman. The whole thing seems fantastic."

Mr. Johnson tapped with his forefinger the slip of paper upon which he had written the two addresses.

"When you take up my references with the lawyers," he suggested, "write to Mr. Stockton personally. Ask him his opinion of me as a man of business, a practical man. You can have him down, if you like. My affairs are of some importance to him and he would not hesitate to make the journey. You must have confidence in me, because now that I have moved in the matter at all, I wish to be sure of the end."

Major Holmes rose to his feet and opened the door for his visitor.

"You can rely upon my taking the necessary steps in the matter," he promised. "The whole business is more painful to me than I can tell you, but it will proceed from now on automatically. I will send Inspector

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Cloutson in to see you the first time he is at Market Ballaston."

Mr. Johnson, as he walked down the hill from the Castle, glanced more than once at the grim jail with its fortress-like walls and bare windows. He was no sentimentalist. Fifteen years' trading upon the Yun-Tse River had accustomed him to scenes of horror and bloodshed, but, nevertheless, he gave a little shiver as he passed the nail-studded entrance. It was here, only a week ago, that a man had been hanged. He recalled the circumstances, only to dismiss the memory immediately. He was concerned with more immediate events. He himself had started into relentless motion the cumbersome machinery of the law. The memory of the Chief Constable's room waxed faint. The tolling of the Castle clock startled him. He glanced up. Above was the scaffold.

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CHAPTER VII

Mr. Johnson was genuinely surprised at the expression in his companion's face when, at the end of that drive home through the drowsy afternoon, she put out her hand to wish him good-by. He forgot her shabby little black lace hat with its two rather battered red roses, her scratched and mended gloves, the thin ready-made wrap around her linen frock. She was no longer a sulky, tired, young woman. For a single moment she was beautiful.

"You have given me quite a wonderful afternoon, Mr. Johnson," she said, "and I am ashamed of myself for having been so quiet all the way home. I am afraid I must have seemed almost ungracious. I wasn't. I was just enjoying it all, and — thank you!"

She was gone before he could do anything but return heartily the warm pressure of her fingers, but she seemed to him to walk with a new grace as she stepped lightly up the tiled path, turned the shining brass door handle, and disappeared into the Little House. He turned round to his car, but instead of making for his own heavy oak gates, he reversed slowly down the lane, swung round in front of the Ballaston Arms and entered. The same little company were assembled in the bar, with the exception of Rawson and the addition of Walter Beavens, the local wheelwright, and Tom Foulds, the veterinary surgeon.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Mr. Johnson said cheerfully. "A long and dusty ride from Norwich, Mr. Landlord. I'll take a whisky and soda — a large soda, please, and a piece of lemon, if you have such a thing."

He settled down into a chair with the air of a man

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who intends to make himself at home, and began to fill his pipe. Mr. Craske was his immediate neighbour. A little distance away the young man Fielding was busy with a box of flies.

"So you had a look at the Hall this morning, sir," the grocer remarked. "I saw you coming through the gates."

"I lunched there," Mr. Johnson confided. "A magnificent place it is, and full of treasures, too! Why, the pictures and tapestries alone must be worth a fortune."

Mr. Foulds joined in the conversation. He was a ruddy-faced young man, inclined to be stout, dressed in somewhat sporting fashion, with riding leggings which he was continually tapping with a switch.

"Worth a mint of money, those tapestries," he declared. "Came from Versailles, some of them — the more modern ones — at the time of the Revolution. Good pictures, too, any quantity of them. I should say the contents of the Hall were worth the best part of half a million. Queer situation, ain't it?"

"In what way?" Mr. Johnson enquired.

The young man wielded his switch assiduously.

"Well, it's no secret round here," he proclaimed, dropping his voice nevertheless, "that Sir Bertram is devilish hard up. They don't know where to turn for money, any of them. And yet with all that valuable property they can't touch it."

"How's that?"

"Every yard of tapestry, every picture worth a snap of the fingers, is an heirloom," Foulds explained. "Every acre of property is entailed. I suppose there's plenty of money been raised on mortgages, but I think they've come to the end of that, from what one hears. Shame, too! Fine old family!"

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"Sir Bertram, I suppose, has been extravagant?" Mr. Johnson suggested.

The veterinary surgeon glanced around.

"Well," he said, "our friend Rawson being absent, we may venture to speak of his Lordship of the Manor freely. There isn't a person in the county could find a word to say against him — him or Mr. Gregory either —but I should say that for making the money fly they are just about the limit."

"Mr. Gregory is reputed to have led a very fast life in town," the grocer interposed timidly.

"And then I don't know as he was a patch on his father," was the veterinary surgeon's complacent rejoinder.

"Mr. Henry seems to be the sober one of the family," Mr. Johnson remarked.

"He's a character, he is," Foulds declared. "A real, old-fashioned, Dickens character. You're right about him being the sober one, though. He'd never spend a sixpence he could help, and I'd back his conscience against the Archbishop of Canterbury's. Have a drink, Mr. Craske."

"With pleasure, Tom."

"Will you honour me, Mr. Johnson?"

"The honour is mine as the thirst certainly is," was the prompt response. "Very kind of you, I am sure."

The young man Fielding, having succeeded with his fly, entered diffidently into the conversation.

"Have the family a town house?" he enquired.

"Not now," Mr. Craske replied. "There was one in Grosvenor Square, but that went ten years ago, the year Sir Bertram lost seventy thousand pounds on the Derby."

"They spend most of their time down here then, I suppose?"

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"I wouldn't say that," the grocer rejoined. "Mr. Gregory, soon after the war, disappeared altogether for a year or so, and he's always taking long trips abroad. The Squire, he just goes up to those things that the gentry from everywhere seem to meet at — the Eton and Harrow, and Varsity Cricket Matches at Lord's, and Ascot and Goodwood."

Mr. Johnson made an effort to bring the discussion back to what was to him its point of greatest interest.

"These financial embarrassments of Sir Bertram and his son," he said, "I presume there is nothing absolutely urgent about them."

"I wouldn't go so far as to admit that," Mr. Foulds replied cautiously. "There was a rumour yesterday that there was a conference of lawyers in London fixed for next week. Mr. Jenkins from Norwich — he's the lawyer who deals chiefly with the mortgages — he did say last week that they couldn't see the year through."

The entrance of Rawson interfered with the trend of the conversation. It was a matter of etiquette at the Ballaston Arms that gossip concerning the Hall was not indulged in while he was present unless he himself introduced the subject. The butler greeted the tenant of the Great House with the slightly extra respect to which his recent visit entitled him.

"Glad to see you at the Hall with us to-day, sir," he remarked. "You will find the Squire a kindly gentleman and hospitable when he takes the fancy."

"I found him most agreeable," Mr. Johnson acknowledged. "I enjoyed very much, too, my brief glimpse of your marvellous art treasures."

"Marvellous they are," Rawson sighed, as he held up his glass to the light. "A bit of tantalisation about them, though, as you might say. Hundreds of thousands there, doing nobody any good."

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"By the way," Mr. Johnson continued, "there were two wonderfully carved wooden Images in Mr. Henry's room. Do they set much store by them?"

"I should say they did, sir. Rather a curious thing about those Images. One of them is damned ugly. That's the one Mr. Gregory sent home from abroad and that Mr. Henry seemed to take a fancy to. Mr. Gregory himself, he has a sort of dislike to it. All the time it was in Mr. Henry's room alone, he never went in if he could help it. Then, about a year ago, the other one turned up. A nice bit of work, that. They're side by side now, and Mr. Gregory don't seem to mind. I've seen him handling them and looking at them for hour after hour, and Sir Bertram too. There's a man been down from London to examine them — made me think they might be worth a bit of money."

"I should think they very likely might be," Mr. Johnson agreed.

"It's a curious thing," the butler observed, filling his pipe, "that more than once the Squire has been for having them broken up, but Mr. Gregory wouldn't listen to it. They had almost words about it one night."

"Broken up," Mr. Johnson repeated. "For what purpose?"

"I couldn't quite follow the argument, sir," Rawson admitted. "The Squire seemed serious enough at the time, but Mr. Gregory had his own way."

The tenant of the Great House rose to his feet a few minutes later, and, amidst a little chorus of "good evenings", strolled out and, starting his car, drove slowly up the lane homewards. Afterwards he left the paved courtyard by a side entrance and paused for a minute or two to look around lovingly at the old kitchen garden, the peaches ripening upon the wall, the apple and pear trees full of fruit, the box-bordered paths, and

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the little patches of cottage flowers in unexpected places. He walked contentedly around his property, his hands behind his back, his pipe still in his mouth, looked into his tomato house and approved of its appearance, exchanged a few words with the gardener about the trimming of a hedge, and passed out on to the lawn. Here he drew a chair into the shade of a cedar tree and, still in a reflective frame of mind, leaned back with half-closed eyes.

His peaceful surroundings seemed to fade away from him. He was back in the steep tangled streets of a Chinese city, on a hand-borne 'rickshaw out in the country, travelling up to the top of a hill, beyond which, through the wood, gleamed the green dome of the Temple of Yun-Tse. He was back on the turgid river where the cruel sun was blistering the deck of his strange craft, and the sound of his little engine, suddenly breaking the hot silence, brought consternation to the tall, evil figure who had been leaning over the side of his boat to watch the oars thrust through the opened places. He watched the coming to life of the young Englishman, heard his talk, fancied that he smelled again the peculiar odours of that strange warehouse. He saw Endacott once more in his quaint costume, immersed in his beloved labours — dead now, for the sake of the treasure which was still withheld.

The tenant of the Great House sat there until a very slight breeze stirred the leaves of the tall elm trees and the church clock from across the way struck seven. Then he rose to his feet, knocked out the ashes from his pipe, and entered the house.

That rustle of west breeze which, heralding eventide, broke the calm of the summer day, did not, as usual, die away with the setting of the sun. A little bank of

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clouds crept up from the horizon, and the wind which seemed to come suddenly from nowhere bent the tops of the trees and drove them before it in black and broken pieces. The afterglow from the sunset passed into a stormy obscurity. No rain fell but the wind ever increased in volume and the darkness grew thicker. Mr. Johnson drank his accustomed whisky and soda at ten o'clock and retired to his room a few minutes later. He lay down, however, with a small alarm watch by his side, and at three o'clock he left the silent house, passed through the postern gate and into the street. The morning darkness at first baffled him. He had to feel the wall to know where he was. He stood there with the palm of his hand flat against it, looking in the direction of the Hall. Suddenly, from the middle of the gulf of darkness, three little flashes of light followed one another quickly. There was a brief pause — then two more — then one. Mr. Johnson turned hurriedly back to the house, changed from his sleeping attire and dressing gown back into his discarded dinner clothes, slipped some cartridges into a revolver which he took from his bedside, and, descending the stairs carefully, passed into the library. Silence still reigned throughout the house, and complete darkness. Mr. Johnson, with the composed mien and even pulse of a man who is used to dangers, settled down to wait.

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CHAPTER VIII

Towards half-past five in the morning Mr. Johnson was awakened from a heavy slumber by the clamorous and increasing twitter of birds in the shrubberies and gardens outside. He woke with the sensation of being exceedingly uncomfortable and of being in an entirely unaccustomed spot. He sat up, looking around him. He was on the floor of the library, his revolver, with one barrel discharged, by his side, a dried but painful cut upon his cheek bone, and with the haunting remains of a most unpleasant odour still hanging about the room. He staggered to his feet with poignant apprehensions of disaster. A panel in the door communicating with the smaller apartment which it had been his purpose to guard had been neatly cut out, and the spring lock apparently picked from the other side. The door itself stood open. Inside, the steel-clamped coffer in which Endacott had kept his manuscripts lay upside down and empty upon the carpet. Mr. Johnson nodded slowly to himself. It was a moment of great humiliation. After fifteen years of adventurous life, of scraps with Chinese cutthroats, Malay thieves, scamps of every sort, armed with every kind of weapon, he had, notwithstanding ample warning, been tricked by an amateur. He made a closer examination and realised how it must have happened. He had waited in the darkness for the opening of the garden door, and the intruder, whoever it might have been, had surprised him by coming in the other way — there were, after all, a dozen windows on the ground floor by which he might have entered — and stealing upon him from behind. He could recall, even then with his dazed senses, as he

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leaned out to get a little fresh air, the absolute noiselessness of that encounter. It was less a sound than the consciousness of somebody's presence which had made him suddenly alert, and then, before he could even turn, arms like iron bands were around his throat and the handkerchief was pressed to his nostrils. Night after night he had waited for what had happened, and when his opportunity had come — well, this was the end of it!

He moved to the telephone, rang up the police station and, after a few minutes' delay, conducted a conversation with the inspector in charge. Afterwards he locked up the library, proceeded upstairs, took a bath, changed into his ordinary tweed morning clothes, and drank several cups of tea.

"Disturbed at all during the night, Morton?" he asked the butler.

"Can't say that I was, sir," the man replied, looking curiously at the slight wound on his master's face.

"You sleep well then," was the latter's dry comment. "There was a burglary here between three and four o'clock. Keep your mouth shut until after the police have been."

"God bless my soul, sir!" the man exclaimed. "You look as though you'd been hurt, sir."

"Nothing to speak of. I heard a noise and went down. Fellow got at me before I could turn the light on. Remember, not a word, Morton. The police sergeant will be here in a few minutes."

The sergeant came; a tall and ponderous man, slow of speech, persistent and given to repetitions. He spent a thoroughly enjoyable hour, notebook in hand, on a blank page of which he made a rough sketch of the room itself and the window through which it was discovered that the intruder had entered.

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"And you miss nothing of value in any other part of the house, sir?" he enquired for the sixth or seventh time, prior to taking his leave.

"Nothing that I can trace," Mr. Johnson replied. "You must remember that I am only a sub-tenant. Nothing of my own is missing, nor any of the familiar objects in the library."

The sergeant returned the book to his pocket.

"A mysterious affair," he pronounced. "Nothing gone, apparently, but a pile of old papers. We must telephone to the lawyers who let the place and interview the tenant. The inspector will be over this afternoon, sir, and I dare say he will be along to see you."

The man took his leave and Mr. Johnson crossed the road and knocked at the door of the Little House. Miss Besant opened it herself and greeted him with a smile.

"I was just coming across," she said. "Madame wants to see you."

Mr. Johnson was ushered into the cool drawing-room, where Madame was lying upon her couch. She held out one hand and with the other waved imperiously to Miss Besant to depart.

"Something has happened — something happened last night!" she exclaimed. "What was it?"

He took the chair to which she pointed, close to her side.

"A burglary," he confided. "I was coming in to ask you to communicate at once with Miss Endacott. The whole of the papers in the chest which was locked up in the inner library are gone."

"The burglar," she demanded breathlessly. "Has he been caught? Is there any clue?"

"Not at present," Mr. Johnson acknowledged. "There hasn't been much time."

"He got away then?"

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"Yes, he got away."

She looked at the scar on her visitor's face.

"Did you see him?" she asked.

"I didn't see him but I felt him," Mr. Johnson rejoined, a little ruefully. "We had scarcely more than a few seconds' scrap in the dark. He came up from behind with a chloroformed handkerchief."

She lay back and closed her eyes. In a moment or two she seemed to recover herself.

"Papers — nothing but papers stolen," she murmured. "That doesn't sound like an ordinary burglary."

"It wasn't," he agreed.

"What do you think about it?" she asked eagerly.

"What is there to think?" he rejoined. "Some one wanted those papers. We must communicate with Miss Endacott at once and ascertain what they were and to whom they would be of value."

"You needn't trouble to do that," Madame confided; "my niece will be here this afternoon. She is coming down to stay with me for a few days."

Mr. Johnson was thoughtful for a moment or two.

"Well," he observed, "it is perhaps opportune."

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded, nervously clasping and unclasping her fingers.

He laid his hand upon hers soothingly.

"You are distressing yourself needlessly, Madame," he said. "I only mean that her visit will make it unnecessary for us to communicate with her. She will be able to tell us whether the papers were of great value."

There was another silence.

"I think I can solve that problem," Madame declared. "They are of no value at all. The coffer contained a collection of Chinese manuscripts, some of

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which my brother had already translated, and a few others which he had not examined."

"Is that so?" Mr. Johnson observed. "Seems queer, doesn't it, if that was all, that there should be bars on the windows and a double lock on the door?"

"My niece will explain that," Madame replied. "There was one which he translated just before he died, which might have had some value. Claire did not feel like examining it at the time. She wished it kept safely, however."

"I see," Mr. Johnson murmured.

"What do the police say about it?" she demanded.

"So far," was the somewhat sardonic rejoinder, "the police have been represented by Sergeant May. His opinion is, I think, that it is a mysterious affair."

"What do you think of it yourself?" she asked him suddenly.

"I think," he replied, "that the burglar, whoever he was, was after those Chinese manuscripts and nothing else. Therefore I don't think it was an ordinary sort of burglar at all. I should say not. It was some one who knew what he wanted, and he seems to have got it."

"I wish I knew the truth about you," Madame sighed.

He smiled.

"Well," he said, "I'm a pretty obvious sort of person, aren't I?"

"No," she answered. "On the contrary, you puzzle me, you frighten me."

"Just why, at the present moment?" he asked tolerantly.

"Because," she confided, her eyes fixed upon his, "I don't understand what you were doing in the lane out by your gate this morning about a quarter of an hour before the burglary."

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"Did you see me?" he enquired, after a moment's pause.

"Yes. I have seen you there other mornings at the same time. What do you do? For whom do you watch?"

"I am a light sleeper," he explained. "Last night I fancied that I heard some one stirring. I had a walk round the place. As it happens, you see, I was right."

She shook her head.

"You were out in the lane," she persisted.

"Perhaps you think I committed the burglary myself," he suggested.

The eyes which were fixed upon his so steadily grew even more intense.

"I should not be surprised," she said. "I should not be surprised at anything I heard about you. I do not believe that any of the stories you tell about yourself are true. You frighten me, living there. I hate it."

"You have nothing to fear from me," he assured her. "I am a very harmless person."

"But you haven't told the truth about yourself," she persisted.

There was the sound of hoofs in the lane. Madame looked out of the window and a wonderful light swept over her face. Sir Bertram was dismounting from the hack which he had ridden across the park. He handed the reins to the roadmender who came hobbling up, threw away his cigarette, and, with the familiarity of habitude, turned the handle of the door and immediately afterwards entered the drawing-room. He nodded to Mr. Johnson as he came over to Madame with outstretched hands.

"Dear Angèle," he said, "you see I anticipated the time of my usual call. I thought perhaps that this news might have upset you."

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"You have heard then?" she exclaimed.

"A lurid account of the affair was served up with my morning tea," Sir Bertram replied. "My commiserations, Mr. Johnson. I am relieved to find you in such good shape, however. The least sensational story is that you were battered almost to death by several brawny-looking ruffians and had already been moved to Norwich Infirmary."

"The report," Mr. Johnson declared, "is exaggerated."

"Anything of value gone?" the newcomer enquired.

"Miss Endacott is the only one who can tell us that," was the quiet answer. "The box containing her uncle's manuscripts was broken open and the manuscripts themselves have disappeared."

Sir Bertram drew up a chair and lit one of the cigarettes from the box which Madame pushed towards him. His long, lean figure looked at its best in the well-cut riding clothes he was wearing. The summer had brought an extra tinge of brown sunburn into his cheeks. His eyes were bright and clear. He seemed in the best of spirits and health.

"That lends quite a note of romance to the affair," he remarked. "I wonder what our local Sherlock Holmes will make of it."

"He has pronounced the affair mysterious," Mr. Johnson confided. "I find it so myself," he continued, a moment later. "One would not have imagined that there were many people with a craze for Chinese manuscripts."

"More useful to us than any one," Sir Bertram remarked. "Gregory has a couple of wonderful wooden Images up at the Hall — you've seen them, Mr. Johnson — which are supposed to be full of jewels if we could only discover the key. That poor fellow Enda-

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cott knew all about it. He was at work on some papers, which he had brought home with him from China, just before his death, but up to then he had not come across anything that helped us."

Mr. Johnson rose to his feet.

"If I might be permitted to pay my respects to Miss Endacott as soon as she arrives," he begged, "I should be glad."

"Certainly," Madame assented.

"Is Miss Endacott expected here?" Sir Bertram asked.

"This afternoon," she replied. "I only heard last night."

For a single second there was a curious change in Sir Bertram's face. The *insouciance*, almost the gaiety, seemed suddenly to have fallen away, as though it had been a mask. His eyes were hard and tired. Then he recovered himself.

"Opportune," he remarked lightly. "Come and see us again soon up at the Hall, Mr. Johnson."

The latter bowed to Madame and turned away. There was something almost menacing in his gravity.

"You are very kind, Sir Bertram," he said, as he took his leave.

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CHAPTER IX

Mr. Johnson returned to find a motor car standing outside his door and Major Holmes with a subordinate in colloquy with Morton. He led them himself to the library, showed them the door with its picked lock, the empty coffer and the window on the ground floor through which the marauder had made an easy entrance. The Chief Constable was perplexed.

"You are only a sub-tenant here, I understand, Mr. Johnson?" he asked.

"Only a sub-tenant," the latter acknowledged.

"And you yourself have never been in this room? I gather that it was locked up by Miss Endacott's instructions."

"Quite so."

"Then you really don't know what has been taken?"

"The contents of the coffer evidently," Mr. Johnson replied. "It was always understood that it contained Chinese manuscripts which Mr. Endacott brought home with him from abroad."

There was a moment's silence. Then Major Holmes continued.

"I have told Inspector Cloutson here," he said, "of your visit to me."

"And of my suspicions?"

"Yes."

The inspector coughed. He had a heavy but ingenuous countenance. Disbelief was stamped upon it.

"Will you gentlemen follow me?" Mr. Johnson invited.

He led them on to the lawn, well away from the house. At a safe distance he came to a standstill and pointed to the library.

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"Endacott," he said, "was murdered for the possession of that other wooden Image and for the manuscript which indicated the whereabouts of the jewels. The object of the murder was achieved in part. A wooden Image was taken. You will find it now at Ballaston Hall. For some reason or another, the murderer failed to secure the document. He probably heard some movement in the house. The burglary last night was undertaken to secure it. Nothing else was touched, but the manuscripts are missing. The only person to whom the manuscripts are useful is the possessor of the Images."

Inspector Cloutson stroked his chin thoughtfully. He looked across towards the great front of the Hall. His was not the type of brain to quickly absorb suspicion, and much of this talk concerning wooden Images and Chinese manuscripts he looked upon as fantastic — almost as fantastic as the idea that a member of one of the great county families whom he revered could so far forget their lofty station as to commit a misdemeanour under the shadow of the law. Crime, in Inspector Cloutson's opinion, was for the criminals. The idea of a Ballaston as a criminal was grotesque.

"You refer to the Ballastons," Major Holmes observed, after a pause.

Mr. Johnson inclined his head.

"I refer to the Ballastons," he assented. "Wait, please, a moment."

Morton came towards them, followed by the young man who was interested in moths. Mr. Johnson welcomed him pleasantly, but with no indication of intimacy.

"Glad to see you, Fielding," he said. "I sent word down that those trout flies had arrived. I'll show them to you directly. That will do, Morton."

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The butler departed. Mr. Johnson turned to the Chief Constable.

"This is Mr. Fielding," he announced. "He is a member of the firm of Watts and Fielding, private enquiry agents. He has been staying in the neighbourhood for the last month, making a few investigations for me."

The relations between the accredited representatives of the law and a private enquiry agent were scarcely likely to be cordial. Major Holmes, however, nodded slightly.

"To some extent, as I told you, I have been anticipating last night's visit," Mr. Johnson continued. "Mr. Fielding, therefore, has spent a considerable portion of his time after midnight watching the egress from the Hall. He will tell you that this morning a man slipped out of one of the side entrances, a door, in fact, which opened from the small library into the garden, at ten minutes past three, and that he followed him to this house."

"Is that a fact?" the Chief Constable asked gravely.

"That is a fact," Fielding replied. "I am prepared to swear to it."

"Did you recognise the man?" Major Holmes enquired.

The other shook his head.

"I was obeying orders in keeping strictly out of sight," he explained. "I was not near enough to recognise him. Once before, some one left by the same door at about the same time, but he looked behind in the park and saw me, so nothing happened."

"If you saw this person enter these premises at that hour of the morning," the Chief Constable enquired, "why did you not follow, in case Mr. Johnson needed assistance?"

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"My express orders were that he should do nothing of the sort," the latter intervened. "I wished, for many reasons, to keep the matter in my own hands. I have been used to scraps," he went on, "in every part of the world. I understand jiu-jitsu, boxing and how to draw a gun as quickly as any one. I never dreamed that I might be outwitted. The visitor from the Hall who stole the manuscripts last night was too clever for me.

"Now, sir," Mr. Johnson continued impressively, "I want everything done in an orthodox fashion, and I know very well your prejudice, and a very natural one, against the interference of private detectives. Mr. Fielding will withdraw from the case from now onwards, but I do expect that, on the basis of the information you have already received, you will at once proceed with the necessary enquiries."

"I have no alternative but to do so," the Chief Constable admitted reluctantly. "I must warn you, however, that I shall do so in the manner which seems to me the most desirable. I shall approach Sir Bertram himself."

"You will use your own discretion, of course," Mr. Johnson said, "but action must be taken at once. There mustn't be time for any one to slip off abroad, or anything of that sort. And I want you to remember this, Major — when you've found last night's burglar, and that ought not to be a difficult job, you should also be able to solve the mystery of my poor friend Endacott's murder."

"That may be so, Mr. Johnson," the other answered, a little sadly. "I can only say that I sincerely hope not. We shall probably meet later in the day."

"I shall be here or in the neighbourhood," the other promised.

The Chief Constable and his subordinate entered the

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car and drove off. They swung round the corner of the lane and a dozen curious pairs of eyes saw them turn in at the park gates.

"What do you think of this, Cloutson?" the former asked.

"Bunkum!" was the prompt reply. "That's what I think — bunkum! And between you and me, Major, I don't think much of that fellow Johnson. A stranger to the neighbourhood. No one knows anything about him. Come here for God knows why, and spinning yarns like this! Bunkum is what I think of it! And as for this burglar, who else except that pettifogging enquiry agent saw any one leave the Great House? Not a soul. We've heard of jobs, Major, done from the inside, done by the victim, haven't we? Those manuscripts, or whatever he calls them, were just as likely to be valuable to Johnson as to any one else. Supposing he wanted them? Well, he's gone the best way he could to help himself. If you ask me what I think about our present errand, sir, I should call it a mare's-nest — nothing more nor less. My idea of the job is to get Mr. Johnson's *dossier* and search the Great House."

The Chief Constable smiled. He had not fully confided in his subordinate. Yet, when he came to reflect upon the matter, Mr. Johnson's *bona fides* had not yet been established. In the depths of his companion's bucolic mind might lurk after all the germ of truth.

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CHAPTER X

So far as the countenance of so perfect a servant as Rawson could betray any expression at all, there was both welcome and a suggestion of hospitality in his manner as he received the callers. Certainly, Sir Bertram was in, Mr. Gregory was in, and Mr. Henry was in. Sir Bertram appeared almost at that moment, coming out of the gun room with a rook rifle under his arm.

"Hullo, Major!" he exclaimed genially. "Glad to see you. Warned in for lunch, I hope."

"Very much obliged, Sir Bertram," was the somewhat hesitating reply. "To tell you the truth ——"

"Ah, business, I see," the other interrupted. "Come along to my den. It is so long since I signed a warrant that upon my word I forgot I was a magistrate. Bring the inspector with you, if you want him."

He led the way to a small and seldom used room, plainly furnished, where he was accustomed at times to interview a tenant, seated himself on an uncomfortable chair before a formal-looking desk, and pointed to an easy-chair for his visitor.

"Nothing serious, I hope," he enquired.

Major Holmes waited until the door was closed.

"Sir Bertram," he began, "you have heard no doubt of the burglary at the Great House."

"My dear Major!" was the reproachful reply. "This is a country village in Norfolk and the burglary happened as long ago as last night. I have heard seven versions of the affair and been given the names of at least seven suspectedly guilty parties."

"I have come to call upon you in connection with

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that affair," Major Holmes continued. "There is a person willing to declare upon oath that a quarter of an hour before the burglary occurred last night some one was seen to leave your house, cross the park, and enter the grounds of the Great House through a gap in the hedge beyond the stable wall."

Sir Bertram sat quite still for a moment. Then his lips protruded slightly and he whistled.

"Well, that's the eighth version," he observed. "I like the last one, Holmes — spicy, to say the least of it!"

"This is not hearsay," the Chief Constable went on. "I have seen the witness myself and heard the story from his own lips. I come to you naturally for help, Sir Bertram. I want a list of your male domestics and I wish to know from your staff whether any one was known or heard to leave this house last night."

"Simple as A.B.C.," Sir Bertram declared, ringing the bell. "Rawson keeps tabs on them all. We've a couple of lads — under footmen, I suppose they'd call themselves — whom I don't know much about. The others are about as likely to commit a burglary as I should be to rob a hen roost. Send Rawson to me," he ordered the man who answered the bell.

It was a matter of seconds only before the butler made his appearance. His master leaned back in his chair as he questioned him.

"Rawson," he asked, "do you know any one — any man — who could have left this house between midnight and three or say four o'clock this morning?"

"Certainly not, sir," was the confident reply.

"You didn't hear any unusual sound in the night like a door opening or anything of that sort?"

"Nothing, Sir Bertram."

"If you were told that some one had left this house

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at about three o'clock and gone down to the Great House, what should you have to say about it?"

"I should say that it was impossible, sir," Rawson asserted. "As you are aware, sir, I sleep in my own quarters adjoining the butler's pantry on the ground floor. My window and door were both wide open last night, and I am a light sleeper. I was not once disturbed."

Sir Bertram turned to the Chief Constable.

"Did your informant specify the door which was made use of?"

"It was the door opening from the smaller library."

Sir Bertram glanced towards Rawson.

"See if that door is fastened," he directed. "Here, you'd better take the inspector with you."

The two men left the room. Sir Bertram tapped a cigarette upon the table and lit it.

"Where did you get hold of this cock-and-bull story, Holmes?" he asked.

The Chief Constable frowned.

"From a perfectly reliable source," he replied. "I have no doubt that Rawson is honest, but I shall want the names of all your servants. I shall also require to interview them all."

Sir Bertram smiled.

"Lord love us, you don't suppose I want to stand in the way of your duty, Holmes?" he said. "When Rawson comes back, you shall have them all up, one by one, and put them through the mill. By-the-by, there was nothing much stolen, was there? I understand the burglar had only tumbled out a coffer full of manuscripts."

"The manuscripts themselves are missing," Major Holmes confided.

"I have seen the lot," Sir Bertram observed care-

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lessly. "Some of them were curious. There wasn't one of them worth sixpence, intrinsically. Endacott was supposed to have one telling us all about the treasure in my Buddha heads, but it never materialised."

Rawson returned in due course, preceded by the inspector.

"The door is properly locked on the inside, sir," the latter announced. "There are no evidences of any one having used that way out into the grounds lately."

"So that's that," Sir Bertram observed, with a little shrug of the shoulders.

"How many servants are there sleeping in the house?" Major Holmes enquired.

"Eleven, sir," Rawson answered.

"I shall require to interview each one of them."

"Get along with it then," Sir Bertram assented resignedly. "Don't forget we lunch at one. Rawson had better take you round to the servants' quarters. When Major Holmes has finished, Rawson, bring him out on to the lawn and serve some sherry."

He dismissed them all carelessly with a little wave of the hand, waited until the door was closed, waited until some minutes afterwards before his expression changed, or a sound escaped from his lips. Then he rose slowly to his feet, lit another cigarette and looked reproachfully at his shaking fingers.

"What a nerve these great criminals must have," he murmured to himself, as he strolled out into the hall. "Henry — hullo, Henry!"

A still, motionless figure stood in the shadow of the staircase on the first landing, looking downward; a figure so still that except for his clothes he might have stepped out of one of the frames which lined the wall.

"Are you coming down or going up or rooted?" Sir Bertram enquired.

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"I will descend," Henry Ballaston replied.

He came down the stairs with slow yet even footsteps, one hand always upon the carved balustrade.

"I heard voices," he said.

"Holmes is here from Norwich," Sir Bertram confided, "and the immortal Cloutson with him — you know, the travelling inspector for the district. They have an idea that some one crossed the park from the Hall last night."

"In connection, I presume, with the burglary at the Great House," Henry observed.

His brother nodded.

"A silly business! Have you seen anything of Gregory?"

"Not since breakfast time. He spoke of going to Norwich. He found he wanted another trunk."

Sir Bertram sighed. The brothers walked out together through the fine Gothic side entrance which led on to the lawns and gardens.

"You had no communication from Mr. Borroughes this morning, I suppose?" Henry Ballaston asked, a little hesitatingly.

"Nothing," was the level reply. "There was a letter from Kershaw — the lawyer fellow of whom Emily spoke so highly. He said that he had studied the position from every point of view and regretted to find that he could discover no means remaining by which sufficient money to pay the overdue interest on the first mortgage could be legitimately raised. The timber will be the only thing, and the timber is Ballaston."

"The timber is sacred," Henry agreed. "Has Mr. Kershaw examined the position so far as regards the Romneys and the three Gainsboroughs?"

"Heirlooms, just the same as the others. They are not to be touched."

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The brothers stood side by side upon the lawn, their faces turned towards the house. Sir Bertram was his usual cool and gracious self. Henry had somehow or other a suggestion of suspended life in his colourless face, his stiff attitude, his cold eyes.

"Major Holmes is examining the servants?" he enquired.

"That was his idea."

"Will he wait until Gregory returns?"

"Very likely. As I think I told you, they seem to have come across some one who can swear that they saw a man leaving the Hall last night, just before the burglary took place."

"But there was no actual burglary," Henry objected.

"A quantity of documents appear to be missing," Sir Bertram confided. "Holmes's attitude seemed to me a little suspicious. I fancy that some one has been getting at him. I am not sure — I must confess to having some doubts about this man Johnson."

"Doubts? Explain yourself, Bertram."

"Johnson's account of himself has never been an entirely credible one. Do you remember the day when he lunched here and he saw the Images?"

"He certainly betrayed surprise," Henry reflected.

"Gregory has a queer idea about it, although it only made us laugh at the time. He said he reminded him of the Chinaman who saved his life on the Yun-Tse River, and who was an important person in the firm of Johnson and Company."

"Mr. Johnson is not a Chinaman," Henry Ballaston replied confidently.

His brother took his arm and moved towards the house. Major Holmes was standing in the entrance.

"No," Sir Bertram agreed, "but the Chinaman might have been Mr. Johnson."

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CHAPTER XI

THE Chief Constable had little to report, but his air of uneasy disquietude remained.

"I think," he announced, "that, so far as I can make out, the servants are all right. Curiously enough, however, it seems that Gregory has a key to the door in question, which he uses sometimes."

"Very probable," Sir Bertram assented. "He likes to come and go out of the house at all times."

"I wonder when he'll be back?" Major Holmes enquired.

"He had very little to do," his father observed. "Found himself a trunk short, or something of that sort. I thought he had bought all his outfit in London, but I suppose he miscalculated."

"When does he go abroad?"

"Saturday week. Sails from Liverpool to Montreal, I think, by an Allan liner."

"The county will miss him," the Chief Constable remarked, as he accepted a glass of sherry from the tray which Rawson had just brought out.

"So, I am afraid, shall I," Sir Bertram admitted. "It is one of the signs of approaching age when one begins to rely upon other people. I remember the time when I used to find it devilish uncomfortable to have a grown-up son. To-day — well, I would rather there were something he could do in England. Shall we go in, Major? No use waiting for Gregory. He's just as likely as not to lunch in Norwich."

Luncheon was at times a difficult function. Holmes was in a sense an unwilling guest, and Sir Bertram was unusually silent. It was Henry, with his stilted phrases

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and old-fashioned sense of the obligations of a host, who kept conversation going. Towards the end of the meal, Gregory put in an unexpected appearance. He shook hands with Holmes, of whose presence he had obviously been informed, and apologised to his father.

"So sorry, Dad," he explained. "It took me some time to find just the trunk I wanted, and then I remembered that I had ordered some riding kit at Houghton's and I thought I might as well be tried on. Any news about the burglary, Major?"

"Nothing of any moment at present," the latter replied.

Gregory busied himself for some time with his lunch, whilst the others loitered. Afterwards they strolled out on to the lawn together for coffee. As soon as it was served, Holmes set down his cup and faced the situation.

"Gregory," he said, "I know you will remember that, as well as being your friend, and I hope the friend of every one here, I am a government official."

Gregory paused in the act of lighting a cigarette and stared at him.

"Why, that's all right," he assented. "What about it?"

"The police have evidence," Major Holmes continued, "that at about three o'clock this morning — that is to say twenty minutes or so before the burglary at the Great House was committed — some one was seen to leave the Hall, cross the park and enter the Great House, or, at any rate, to disappear in that neighbourhood."

Gregory finished lighting his cigarette.

"Where on earth did the police get hold of their information?" he enquired. "From a poacher?"

"From a person whose word it would be a little dif-

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ficult to upset," the Chief Constable replied. "Acting on his information, I have come up here to pay an official visit. I have interviewed all the servants without result. I understand that you possess a key to the smaller library door which you sometimes use."

"I often use it," Gregory admitted. "If I dine out or anything of that sort, or come home by the mail from London, I use it to avoid undoing all the bolts of the front door."

"Where was the key last night? Anywhere where any one could have got hold of it?"

"I shouldn't have thought so. It's in my dressing room somewhere."

"You didn't lend it to any one?"

"Certainly not. No one has ever asked me for it."

"You didn't use it yourself?"

"Last night? No. I haven't used it for weeks."

Major Holmes nodded.

"Well," he said, "that's that! I now appeal to you all. Can you help me? A reliable witness states that some one left the Hall through that library door last night, was seen to walk across the park and, to all reasonable supposition, was the person who assaulted and chloroformed Mr. Johnson, and committed the burglary. You will realise that this is a serious statement. Can any of you suggest anything which might throw light upon the affair?"

"All that I can suggest," Gregory remarked, "is that your informant must have been seeing spooks. Who is he? One of the villagers?"

"There need no longer be any secret about his identity," Major Holmes decided. "Our informant is a private detective employed by Mr. Johnson."

There was an intense and ominous silence. Henry Ballaston drew his chair a little farther back into the

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shade, as though he suddenly felt the sun too strong. Sir Bertram whistled softly, but for once in his life seemed guilty of an almost unnatural action. Gregory stood as though turned to stone. Across his face for a moment there flitted an expression of dismay. The Chief Constable saw it and his heart sank. It was Sir Bertram's brain which moved the quickest.

"How the mischief did this Mr. Johnson get hold of a private detective at a moment's notice?" he enquired.

"He has had him in the neighbourhood for some time," Major Holmes replied. "His presence in the park last night was not accidental. He was employed by Mr. Johnson in connection with certain theories which he — Johnson — held as to the murder of Mr. Endacott."

"This is all most amazing," Sir Bertram observed.

"A very curious action on the part of a man who is a total stranger to the neighbourhood," Henry put in.

The Chief Constable brooded for several moments. His official duty was hard to follow. The whole circumstances were unusual. He faced the situation from the common-sense point of view.

"Johnson may be a stranger to the neighbourhood," he admitted, "but I do not think that his appearance here is so entirely casual as he tried to make out. It transpires that he was a partner of Endacott's in the great firm of Johnson and Company. I believe that the real object of his coming here was to solve the mystery of Endacott's murder."

"Wu Ling, my God!" Gregory exclaimed, in genuine excitement. "The moment I saw him I thought I recognised him. Then it seemed incredible. Why, of course I was a fool ever to doubt it," he went on. "He played the Chinaman out there to do his trading up in the

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villages. He had lived there most of his life. It was easy enough. Then, when he finished with the business and came back here, he Europeanised himself. My God, what a fool I have been!"

"I don't know anything about that," Major Holmes observed. "He came to me in Norwich a short time ago and he placed before me some very serious information. I am using my own discretion in what I am about to say. By now you must know just what I am up against. Again I appeal to you for your help."

In the background Henry shook his head gravely. Sir Bertram, with the slightest possible shrug of the shoulders, turned away and lit a cigarette. Gregory, completely at his ease again, lolled a little deeper in his wicker chair.

"My dear fellow," he expostulated, "how the deuce can any of us help you? I tell you frankly, if any one left the house last night — and I don't believe they did — I for one don't know anything about it. As to the murder — well, if Mr. Johnson's private agent can find out anything about that, the whole neighbourhood will be indebted to him. How on earth is he likely to succeed, however, when you and Scotland Yard have failed?"

"The murder, so far as our investigations took us," Major Holmes said patiently, "was entirely lacking in direct motive. The burglary, on the contrary, does seem to have had an extraordinary but clear object. The burglar got away with a number of Chinese manuscripts. Amongst these manuscripts ——"

"I know what you are going to say," Gregory interrupted, smiling as though in amusement, "but you're wrong, all the same. Old Endacott had been through them. There wasn't one which could help the owner of the Images to discover the treasure."

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"Where are these infernal Images?" Major Holmes asked.

"They have been moved upstairs into my apartments," Henry Ballaston intervened. "If it would afford you any satisfaction to inspect them, I will take you there with pleasure."

"I should like to see them," Major Holmes decided.

They all returned to the house, Gregory quitting his chair with an air of reluctance. The two Images stood in a small sitting room opening out from Henry Ballaston's bedroom at the top of the house; an apartment of extraordinary, almost monastic simplicity. They stood side by side on an old black oak bureau, and against the white of the walls they showed up with almost glaring effect.

"The Body and the Soul," Gregory pointed out. "I don't think they have ever been worth what poor old Bill Hammonde and I went through for them. They got Bill, too. Good chap, he was!"

"The legend is," Sir Bertram explained politely, "that those heads are filled with jewels. Yet we have never been able to discover an opening or aperture of any sort."

"If there is any truth in the story," Major Holmes suggested, "why don't you break them up?"

Sir Bertram shivered.

"That, at least," he said, "one would keep for a last effort. Those Images, Holmes, are nearly a thousand years old, and if you are any judge of such things, you will see at once that they were carved by a great artist. With their history I should imagine that their value at Christie's would be at least several thousand pounds each, so long as they are intact."

Major Holmes took one into his hands and set it down again, amazed at the weight.

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"Why, they're almost as heavy as bronze," he exclaimed.

"The wood of which they are fashioned is a species of teak wood — almost extinct now," Sir Bertram explained. "Their weight, of course, is rather an argument against their being hollow. On the other hand, they might be hollow and filled with jewels."

"There is a further legend," Gregory confided, "that there is inside some sort of infernal machine invented during the last century by the priests, which would go off at any rough usage. That, I must say, seems to me a bit thick. At the same time, the Chinese were always rather great at explosives."

"I imagine," Major Holmes said, "that you will not let this superstition stand in your way, provided you are unable to discover the secret opening."

"As a last resort," Sir Bertram declared, "we have decided to destroy the less pleasing of the Images."

"And I," Gregory announced, in a low tone, his eyes fixed upon the leering Image of the Body, "mean to be the one to strike the blow. One gets kind of superstitious over there, you know, Holmes," he went on. "I lost possession of the other Image for a time. The robbers got off with it when they raided the train and killed poor old Hammonde, but that unpleasing-looking devil I brought home with me. All I can say is that I don't want to be left alone with him again for a month or six weeks. You wouldn't have much chance, would you, at the Norwich Assizes if you pleaded that you had been driven to commit a murder through the influence of an Image? A Chinese judge would have understood it. All I know is that on that boat I was never myself."

"And here?" Holmes asked curiously.

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"I kept out of the way of the thing when it was once here," Gregory replied. "Uncle Henry took care of it then, and I think it would take more than the power of an Image to move him from the paths of rectitude. Then — through old Endacott, by-the-by — we got hold of the other one. So now I don't mind. It is only when he's out of reach of the Soul that that chap's supposed to do any harm."

"You were lucky to regain possession of the other Image," the Chief Constable observed, after a moment's pause. "Through Mr. Endacott, I think you said?"

"In a sort of way," Gregory answered coldly.

"You couldn't be a little more explicit?" the other persisted.

The silence which followed was portentous, charged with electricity. It was Sir Bertram who laid his hand gently upon his son's shoulder.

"Gregory is rather sensitive about this business," he said. "Considering all that he went through, I do not wonder at it. If ever it becomes expedient for us to explain exactly how the second Image came into our possession, we will do so. That moment scarcely seems to have yet arrived."

Major Holmes abandoned the subject a little abruptly. He walked along the great corridor with its rows of pictures upon one side and mullioned windows on the other, speechless and absorbed. The whole place seemed flooded with afternoon sunshine which found its way into the gloomiest corners, touching some old suits of armour with a gleam of fire, tracing zigzag hieroglyphics upon the smooth white stone floor. He had made up his mind what course of action to adopt and it had not been an easy task. He sent for Inspector Cloutson and stood making his *adieux* to his hosts. At the last minute he drew Gregory on one side.

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"I hear you are starting off on another of your long rambles, Gregory," he said.

"Something a little more permament this time. I am going to try the Far West first — lose myself for a year or two. Nothing definite seems to be known just yet, but there are rumours that there have been some big finds of gold right up the Yukon. If I don't have any luck, I shall come back and try ranching. I've got a job out there."

"It's true then, what they are saying?" the Major continued diffidently. "Things here are pretty bad?"

"Rotten," Gregory admitted. "Unless a miracle happens, such as those jewels materialising, or something of that sort, Ballaston must go before the autumn."

"It is bad news," the other sighed. "It is almost a tragedy. Enough to drive any one crazy," he added, his rather kindly eyes resting for a moment upon Gregory's face. "I am going to give you a word of advice, if I may. We were at school together, and I practically owe my position here to your father. I shall have to settle with my conscience for saying it — I may decide to chuck up my job — but I'm going to say it. If you've got your kit ready, move off. I don't like the look of things down here for you. That's all."

For a moment Gregory was speechless — not exactly from surprise but from some mixture of emotions which found outlet in speech difficult. Then he suddenly took the hand which Holmes had extended and wrung it.

"You're a good fellow, Holmes," he said. "I don't like the look of things myself, and that's a fact. I may pop off, if I see my way clear. If I don't — well, you won't have any disagreeable duties to perform at the Castle. I'll promise you that."

The inspector put in his appearance and the two

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men took their leave. Gregory remained for a few minutes motionless upon the broad semicircle of white stone stretching out from the front door, gazing after the receding car. Presently his father moved up to his side.

"Holmes seems to have a bee in his bonnet, Gregory," he ventured tentatively.

Gregory nodded.

"He's a good fellow," he declared. "It cost him something to do it, I know, but he's given me the office. Advised me to clear out within the next twenty-four hours. It's that fellow Johnson."

"Well, if you have made up your mind to go," Sir Bertram said, "why not? They can't do anything in a desperate hurry, and you'll get a run for your money at least out there."

Gregory seemed for a moment puzzled, then distressed. He turned and looked at his father. Sir Bertram's expression, however, was inscrutable. Finally he swung on his heel.

"At any rate," he decided, "I'll finish my packing."

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CHAPTER XII

"THINGS do be happening round about here, for sure," Mr. Pank remarked, as he moved down the whisky bottle from its shelf. "What it all may lead to is more than a body can say, but I don't like the look of it, Mr. Craske."

The grocer added less than his usual modicum of water to his whisky. His aspect was gloomy. So also were the aspects of Mr. Franks, the butcher, who had strolled across for news, and Walter Beavens, the wheelwright, who had come on a similar errand.

"It's almost as bad," Mr. Craske declared, "as the week after the murder. Every one went about then, as it were, on tiptoe. Now this burglary, taken by itself, ain't anything to make special mention of. Why, Mr. Johnson himself, he was in the morning after it happened, and he treated it mostly as a joke."

"It's my belief," Mr. Pank pronounced, "that there's something more serious brewing. There's Inspector Cloutson come to stop in the village. There's Major Holmes, the Chief Constable, up and down from the Hall all day. There's Mr. Johnson, he don't come near any more. Mr. Fielding — him we took for a schoolmaster and whom they do say was a kind of detective — he ain't been in. And Mr. Rawson — why, no one ain't seen him for four days. We shall have news before long, and bad news, I'm afraid it may be."

"There's wild talk going about," Mr. Craske sighed, "and what it may mean, no one can say for sure, but what I do say is, reason is reason, and is it likely that any one here could have a grudge against a poor old harmless fellow like Mr. Endacott? All this talk of

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Images and Chinese documents and suchlike seems as though it had come out of the pages of one of these serial novels as folks read in the newspapers. I don't take no stock of such stuff."

Mr. Franks pushed his tankard across to be refilled.

"There's one bit of bad news, at any rate, may be sprung upon us at any moment," he said. "They do say that every servant in the Hall had a month's notice yesterday. I heard that from Miss Shane, the housekeeper's niece."

The landlord shook his head gloomily.

"Things do seem to be pointing that way," he admitted, "and Mr. Rawson keeping away and all. If so be that it's true, it will be a sad loss. The Squire be a proud man in his way, but he be a true gentleman, and so be Mr. Henry, and a more popular young gent than Mr. Gregory has never been known in the county. It's a wonderful property to have to give up."

"We'll get some one here, I suppose," Mr. Craske predicted pessimistically, "who's made pots of money by being careful, and goes on saving pots the same way. Some of those big houses, the way they do go through their books and talk about the Stores to you! Why, here's Mr. Rawson."

The butler entered, solemn, ponderous and dignified as ever. He raised his black bowler hat in acknowledgment of the greetings which assailed him from all sides and sank slowly into a chair.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said. "Mr. Pank, I'll take double my usual quantity of Scotch whisky."

"With me, Mr. Rawson," the grocer insisted. "We've missed you the last few days."

Rawson sighed.

"I felt too worried in my mind for company," he

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confessed. "It's no secret to you all, so why should I act mysterious about it. There's skeery doings at the Hall."

There was a little rustle of interest. Rawson, disposed for gossip, waited until his drink was placed in his hand and solemnly pledged its donor.

"To begin with," he confided, "it's no secret now that we're in trouble. We may have acted foolish," he went on. "Nothing, of course, can be said for seventy thousand pounds lost at Newmarket, and a trifle more than that last year. Foolish we may have been, but the gentry have always had their weaknesses. The hounds have cost us a cool eight thousand a year for the last five years, and subscriptions getting less all the time. Then the taxes. It seems whatever sort of government we get these days they want your money — fingers all itching for it. Get you all ways! Income Tax and Land Tax — why, it's a wonder they don't grab the breath out of your body. It's the first time such a thing's happened to me in my career, but last night — you'll believe me, gentlemen — I had my notice."

There was a murmur of sympathy. Rawson raised his glass and drank.

"It was Mr. Henry, as usual, who had to tackle the job," he continued. "He sent for us one by one to his study, where he sat as prim and formal as ever, with all his catalogues around and his books of reference. 'Rawson,' he said, 'you have been an excellent servant, but conditions render it necessary for my brother and me to close this house for the present. We are, in fact, ceasing to keep an establishment. I am compelled, therefore, to ask you to accept a month's notice.' All very proper and regular, gentlemen, but I could see that Mr. Henry were feeling it. Mrs. Shane came out all crying. I seen him afterwards, though, and he were

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just the same as usual, except that his face were as white as parchment."

"It do be a sad loss for all," Mr. Pank declared. "There's no word of anything but good in these parts for any of them — for the Squire, or Mr. Henry, or Mr. Gregory either."

"As though this weren't trouble enough," Rawson proceeded portentously, "there's all sorts of mysterious doings and rumours afloat, about enough to drive a body crazy. You mind the young man Fielding, who called himself a retired schoolmaster and sat in the corner pretending to make flies?"

"The hypocrite!" Mr. Craske exclaimed.

"A detective, that's what he was," Rawson went on. "Not a police detective, you understand, but one of them that goes about spying for a living. Now he is up and swore that the night of the burglary he seen some one leave the Hall by the oak library, which is Mr. Gregory's private way almost, twenty minutes or half an hour before the burglary were committed."

There was a little buzz of exclamations and remarks, a general feeling of indignation against the pseudo-schoolmaster.

"If he were one of these paid spies," Mr. Craske enquired, "who were paying him?"

"That I can't say for sure," the butler acknowledged, "but I have my suspicions — very grave suspicions too."

"And whom might you be fancying to be the man, Mr. Rawson?" one of the little group asked.

"Him as has taken the Great House — Mr. Johnson, by name," was the injured reply. "We've had him up to lunch too, and treated him, as it were, beyond his station. I'm glad to find he's not here to-day, gentlemen. There's a word or two I might have had to say to him."

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"It do seem most mysterious," the innkeeper declared. "What do you suppose this Mr. Johnson has got to do with it all, Mr. Rawson, that he's putting his oar in?"

"Mr. Johnson," the butler announced, "has come to these parts under false pretences. There's many has wondered why he settled here and many asked him the question, and all the time he answered innocent like that he just wanted the country and the house suited him, and so on. Do you mind — all on you — when he pretended to be surprised about the murder? He knew about it all the time. He was Mr. Endacott's partner out somewhere in foreign parts, and he settled down here in a mischievous kind of way to make trouble and disturbance amongst his betters."

"Well, I never!" Mr. Pank exclaimed. "A pleasanter-spoken body never came in the place or a more harmless looking. There's nothing fresh, is there, Mr. Rawson, about the murder?"

"God knows!" was the butler's ponderous pronouncement. "There's strange things all around us, and what they may mean or where they may lead to we none of us can tell, at this present moment."

"There is Mr. Johnson," the grocer exclaimed, looking out over the muslin blinds, "and Inspector Cloutson with him. Look at 'em walking together, so confidential like."

"I'd like to know what they're saying," Mr. Craske confessed. "Heads almost touching, as you might say. And did you see the Inspector turn around and look across towards the Hall?"

The two men halted outside the postern gate. Presently they separated, and, with a brief nod, Mr. Johnson entered his own domain, whilst Inspector Cloutson turned and made his way back towards the police sta-

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tion. The little company watched Mr. Johnson's retiring figure as they had once watched his progress down the village street on the day of his first visit.

"In my opinion," Rawson declared emphatically, "that's the man who's brought most of the mischief into this neighbourhood. I'm not one to wish any of my neighbours harm, but if the chap who broke into the Great House the other night had been of my way of thinking, he'd have given him one which would have kept him quiet for a bit longer than this."

Mr. Johnson moved rather wearily to his favourite seat under the cedar tree, and sat there for several minutes in tired contemplation. He awoke from a fit of brooding to find Katherine Besant crossing the lawn towards him. She was bareheaded and it was obvious that she had been running. He rose to his feet.

"Come and sit down," he begged.

"I can't stop," she answered. "I just came in. I wanted to have a word or two with you."

He took her hands in his and looked at her steadily. She was a little flushed with her hurrying, but it struck him that her hair was more carefully arranged and that her linen frock, simple though its fashion, was becoming. The slight eagerness in her manner, communicated also to her expression, gave her an air of greater life and vivacity.

"Mr. Johnson," she exclaimed, "I really can't stop. I don't know when Madame may want me. But what does it all mean? Every one seems wildly unhappy, and it all seems to centre round you. What are you doing to everybody? You were so kind to me."

"My dear," he replied gently, "it would take a long time to explain. Very soon you will know everything."

"But the everything that I am to know seems as

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though it were going to be horrible!" she cried. "Madame looks as if she were about to die every moment. Sir Bertram rode away from seeing her this morning looking like a ghost. They say that Mr. Gregory left last night for abroad. Miss Endacott sent three notes to him yesterday. I know that she wanted him to come to see her. He wouldn't. And the place seems full — full of phosphorescence. It's like a pause before a thunder storm. No one seems to know quite what to expect. Is it you who have been stirring up all this trouble?"

He shook his head.

"The trouble, such as it is," he assured her solemnly, "was caused by those who must suffer for it."

"Who are they?" she demanded.

He pointed over his shoulder towards the Hall.

"The Ballastons," he answered.

"But what have they done?"

He shook his head.

"Don't ask me too much," he begged. "It's an ugly story, and you'll know it soon enough. Only, believe me, it isn't I who am bringing it all about."

"But you could stop it," she expostulated.

"Nothing in the world could stop it," he answered. "I don't look like a superstitious man, do I, Miss Besant?"

"I shouldn't have said so," she admitted.

"I have this belief, though," he went on, "which you may call superstitious, or you may not. There are some things which a man who meddles with must suffer for. I have seen it in my younger days in Egypt, and I have seen it also in China. I have seen a man who posed as a great *savant* and Egyptologist destroy a sacred tomb. The newspapers of the world were filled with accounts of the treasure he discovered. He died

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within a few months, and to this day no one knows how. And then tell me this, by what right does a young man like Gregory Ballaston, simply because he has courage and enterprise, and because he is faced with ruin, dare to come out to a strange country, break into a sacred temple and rob it? Well, he found no treasure, but for the evil which has come because of his wrong-doing, you must not blame me who point the finger to his guilt. You must blame something which neither you nor I fully understand, but which is working for a punishment just as surely."

"But you don't think," she faltered, "you can't believe, that Gregory Ballaston killed Mr. Endacott."

"The law will have to decide that," he answered gravely.

She sat for several moments, pensive and still. Then she rose to her feet.

"I think it is all very horrible," she sighed.

"Life has its grim and terrible side," he declared, "but underlying it all there is a sense of justice which has made us humans frame laws and institute a code of punishment. The instinct to do this and abide by the results is a part of nature itself. No one really escapes the consequences of ill-doing. Will you promise me one thing, Miss Besant?"

She had been in the act of turning away. She paused.

"Everything may be changed here in a few days," he went on, "and, of course, I may be pretty unpopular. Will you promise me that you will not go away without seeing me?"

She hesitated for a moment. Then she gave him her hand quickly. To his surprise there were tears in her eyes.

"I promise," she said. "You have been kind to me,

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at any rate. You are the first person who has been really kind to me for years."

She moved away too quickly for him to detain her. Mr. Johnson returned slowly to the house, over which the shadow of tragedy seemed once more to be brooding.

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CHAPTER XIII

"Doing me well for our farewell dinner, Dad," Gregory murmured appreciatively, as he set down his glass with a little gesture of reverence. "'70 Port."

Sir Bertram smiled pleasantly. It was not for the two footmen standing motionless at either end of the magnificent sideboard, or even for Rawson behind his master's chair, to know that this was anything but an ordinary function. Conversation throughout the meal had taken no account of possible catastrophe. They had talked of the sporting side of Gregory's expedition; Sir Bertram himself had shot big game in Canada more than once.

"There are only a few bottles left, I regret to say," Sir Bertram remarked. "We started on the last bin at the commencement of the year."

"This is the Cockburn's shipping," Henry put in. "We have always considered it the finer wine. If you will pass the decanter, Bertram, I will indulge in my second glass."

Before the decanter was finished Rawson and his satellites had departed. Sir Bertram glanced at his watch.

"You have nearly an hour," he said. "What time did you tell Holmes you would leave?"

"At ten o'clock," Gregory replied. "The train leaves Norwich at eleven-thirty."

Sir Bertram rose from his place. They strolled into the library, drank coffee and liqueurs, and lit cigarettes. There was still nothing in their conversation to indicate the great crisis. Henry was the first to introduce a note of unexpectedness.

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"If I may claim ten minutes of your time, Gregory," he said, "it would gratify me if you would pay a visit to my room. You too, I trust, Bertram," he added.

"Why, of course, Uncle," Gregory acquiesced. "I'll just fill my case with these cigarettes, if you don't mind, Dad. May save me opening my travelling bag."

"By all means," his father begged.

They ascended the great staircase, Gregory pausing every now and then to look at one of his favourite pictures. Henry led the way to his own room with its quaint air of monasticity and severity, accentuated by the oriel-shaped windows. He closed the door carefully behind him.

"I should like before you depart, Gregory," he began, "to assure you that my sympathies have been entirely with you in your gallant but non-successful attempt to restore the fortunes of our family. I may, or may not agree with you in your decision that these" — he waved his hand towards the two Images — "should remain unbroken. There are times," he went on, "when I fancy that our friend there with the very evil and mocking leer is trying to boast of the treasures he possesses, and with which he refuses to part. That, however, is an effort of the imagination in which I seldom indulge. It occurred to me further that I should like, before you leave, to prove to you that my sympathy with your enterprise was not confined to a merely passive attitude. My actions may not have been entirely judicious, but they were well-intentioned. It was I who on a certain night made use of your key, entered the Great House in, I must confess, a surreptitious manner, relieved myself of interference on the part of Mr. Johnson, I am afraid in somewhat inconsiderate fashion, and purloined the manuscripts, which I had

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hoped might help us towards the discovery of the treasure."

The cigarette which Sir Bertram had been holding between his fingers slipped on to the carpet and lay there almost unnoticed. He gazed at his brother with a great astonishment in his face. Gregory, taken even more by surprise, stared at him, speechless and open-mouthed. Neither of them said a word. Henry stooped down, picked up the lighted cigarette, and threw it into the fireplace.

"Henry, you're crazy!" Sir Bertram exclaimed at last.

"Uncle Henry!" Gregory cried.

Something which was finally a smile parted Henry's lips, as he pointed to a neat package upon the table.

"These are the manuscripts," he said. "I regret to say that my expedition was a failure. Nothing there helps us in any degree."

"But how the devil do you know?" Gregory demanded. "Whom did you get to read them?"

"During the last few months," his uncle confided, "with a view to making this enterprise a success, I have studied and read Chinese."

"God bless my soul!" Sir Bertram gasped.

"The language presented its difficulties," Henry admitted. "During my last visit to London in January I consulted a Chinese scholar who put me in the right way, and I have attained to a certain proficiency — enough, at any rate, for the purpose. It struck me that Major Holmes's enquiries into the matter were becoming somewhat unpleasant, and I thought, therefore, that I would confide the truth to you, in case at any time suspicion should fall upon another person. This parcel containing the documents contains also a letter from me acknowledging my exploit and a letter of

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apology to Miss Endacott, whose property I suppose they must be considered. They are undamaged and, except for the slight injury to Mr. Johnson, which I regret was necessary, the affair seems to me to be trivial."

Gregory clasped his forehead.

"Trivial!" he groaned.

"There will, I fear, be a certain loss of dignity should I be called upon to answer for my misdoing," Henry concluded, "but I can assure you that I shall take no steps to evade any action which may ensue. That, I think, is all. It only remains for me, Gregory, to wish you success abroad. Of our own future here, we will not speak. Whilst the Ballaston treasures and heirlooms remain intact my place is with them. A pleasant voyage, Gregory!"

He shook hands and conducted them courteously to the door. His little pat on his nephew's shoulder was the nearest approach to affection he had ever shown. Gregory and his father descended the stairs almost in silence. When they reached the hall, Gregory sank into a chair and held his head in his hands.

"Dad, was that a dream?" he demanded. "I can't conceive it. Uncle Henry, of all men in the world!"

"It is the Ballaston spirit concealed," Sir Bertram murmured.

For a quarter of an hour or so father and son sat in the great hall without speech. There was a curiously intense silence, broken only by the ticking of a large clock, and, through the wide-flung window, the twittering of a nightingale preparing for his aftermath of song. Sir Bertram rose at last to his feet.

"Let us walk on the terrace, Gregory," he suggested. "The car will be round in a few minutes."

They strolled out together, Sir Bertram correct and

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debonair, from the polish of his well-brushed hair to the pearl studs in his shirt and his scrupulously cut dinner clothes; Gregory in travelling tweeds, prepared for his journey. Sir Bertram took his son's arm as they commenced their leisurely promenade.

"I am afraid," he said, in a tone of very rare gravity, "that it's all up with us Ballastons, Gregory. You're young and fit though, and I've got quite enough to amuse myself with — it will have to be France, I suppose, or Spain. It's all a compromise, of course, and a cursed compromise. There's only one place for an Englishman to live, and that's on his own land. It's the devil's own luck to lose Ballaston, but we've gone the limit, eh, Gregory, to try to keep it?"

"Yes," Gregory admitted. "We made a bid for it, at any rate — even Uncle Henry!"

His tone had grown more serious. The shadow of something unspoken seemed to be lying between them.

"Personally," Sir Bertram continued, "I regret nothing, I blame nobody for anything. I consider that everything was justified. You have to make a fresh start, Gregory. Don't do so with that somewhat bourgeois impediment — a slurred conscience. What has been done has been done, and is finished with."

Gregory for a moment did not reply. His puzzled eyes sought his father's, but sought them in vain.

"For my part," Sir Bertram repeated steadily, "I regret nothing. It was worth the effort. And as for Henry — God bless him!"

The lights of the car flashed from the stable yard.

"And so, my dear boy," his father concluded, in his ordinary tone, "you swing your bundle, figuratively speaking, at the end of your stick, and set out on your allegorical journey. Only, for God's sake, don't come back Lord Mayor of London!"

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Gregory had already taken his seat, the chauffeur's hand was upon the change speeds gear, when Rawson hurried forward.

"There is another car coming up the avenue, sir," he announced. "Would it be as well to wait for a moment?"

Gregory looked out of the window. He could see the twin lights flashing in the distance, gleaming slantwise through the trees, then again pools of light in the semi-darkness. For only a moment he hesitated, but, during that moment, it seemed to him that he was taking leave of much that was dear in life. Then he stepped out of the car and stood upon the edge of the terrace.

"It might be as well, Rawson," he agreed, with somewhat elaborate casualness.

"I wonder who the devil it can be at this time of the night?" Sir Bertram speculated.

The car resolved itself into shape. Its very crudity, its ugliness, seemed symbolic. The driver was in plain clothes, but he sat stiffly and there was something official about his appearance. By his side was Major Holmes. Behind sat Inspector Cloutson. The two latter descended as the car drew up.

"Well, Major?" Sir Bertram exclaimed. "What new thunderbolt are you going to launch?"

The Chief Constable rather avoided his eyes.

"We want a word with you, please," he confided, laying his hand lightly upon Gregory's arm.

They all entered the house together. Sir Bertram led the way to the library, thrust open the door and closed it again when they had all entered.

"Now what the devil is it this time, Holmes?" he asked, a little testily. "You mustn't be annoyed with me if I say that I am getting rather tired of these visitations."

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"I deeply regret the necessity for the present one," was the grave reply. "Gregory Ballaston, I am sorry to tell you that Inspector Cloutson here has a warrant for your arrest. I should strongly advise you to make no reply to the charge and to come with us to Norwich."

"What is the charge?" Gregory demanded.

"A very serious one, I am afraid," Major Holmes announced. "I have, as a matter of fact, two warrants; the first charging you, Gregory Ballaston, with assault on one Peter Johnson, and burglary at the Great House on the night of July 28th, and the second by which you stand charged with the murder of Ralph Endacott at the Great House on June 30th of last year. There is nothing to be gained by denial or comment or anything else, at the present moment. I beg you, Gregory, not to attempt any reply but to come with us."

The door behind had been opened so softly that no one heard it. They were all standing motionless when Henry, with a brown paper parcel under his arm, entered.

"But that is ridiculous, Major Holmes," he said quietly. "You must have been very greatly misled. It was I who was guilty of the burglary. Here, in this parcel, you will find all the documents I purloined, or I might say borrowed, the instrument with which I cut out the panel of the door, another with which I picked the lock — instruments, I may say, obtained with the greatest possible difficulty from an establishment in London."

There was a moment's blank silence. Major Holmes's expression, after the first shock of surprise, was one of complete incredulity.

"This is a very remarkable statement on your part,

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Mr. Ballaston," he observed. "I presume you wish us to take note of what you say. At the same time I have, I am sorry to remind you, a warrant against your nephew on a more serious charge."

Henry Ballaston apologised with dignity.

"I regret," he said, "not to have mentioned the two affairs together. I, also, on June 30th of last year, after a few words of unpleasant discussion with Mr. Endacott, shot him through the head."

Once more there was a brief spell of breathless silence. Henry Ballaston was entirely master of the situation, perfectly self-possessed, slightly apologetic. Father and son were gazing into each other's eyes with mutual and amazed interrogation.

"You see," Henry continued, in explanatory fashion, "Mr. Endacott was a very unreasonable man. He admitted that he had made a translation of the manuscript, but he refused to give it to me. He desired his niece to profit by it. I suppose I must have lost my temper. I shot him and secured the other Image, but could find no trace of the manuscript. Hence my second effort within the last few days. Have I made myself quite clear?"

Sir Bertram's fingers upon his son's arm had grown like the grip of a vice. He leaned forward.

"Do you mean to say that you didn't do it, Greg?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Before God, I didn't!" was the passionate reply. "I thought it was you."

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CHAPTER XIV

Mr. Johnson, that same evening, was smoking the cigar of discontent, drinking the coffee of bitterness, and sipping the brandy of fire. Around him was all the stillness and the sweetness of the summer twilight which he loved so much; stars burning in a violet sky, the breath of roses in the air, the peaceful village sounds in his ears, more lulling and soothing than absolute silence. Yet he was filled with disquietude. He rose and, with his hands in his pockets, paced the long strip of velvety lawn. What he had done, what he had worked for, seemed to him to be a simple act of justice. Yet with its accomplishment he was acutely conscious of an intense isolation. No one was in sympathy with him. Every one loved the wicked Ballastons. Even Katherine Besant had left him, her eyes streaming with tears. Madame had sent imploring but vain messages. In the village he felt that it was barely safe to show himself. Then, when he was wondering where to look for consolation, the postern gate opened quickly. Two women entered — Katherine Besant and Claire. He moved forward to welcome them.

"Miss Endacott," Katherine explained, "wants to see you immediately and talk to you. Take her away somewhere. I will wait."

"I am pleased to talk to Miss Endacott anywhere she wishes," Mr. Johnson acquiesced.

"In the study, quickly," Claire begged.

She swung round upon him as soon as they had entered the room — superb, beautiful but furious.

"Mr. Johnson," she began, "I have come to beseech you, to insist that you move no further in this horrible

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affair. Nothing can bring my uncle back to life; nothing can ever still the remorse of whoever killed him. Beyond that, let it rest. I implore you, Mr. Johnson, to do nothing more."

"My dear young lady," he replied gravely, "think of what you are proposing. You can scarcely be content to let your uncle's murderer go scot free."

"That is just what I do want," she persisted. "He gained nothing by it, and — I am quite sure that, whoever it was, he was not altogether sane. Even on the steamer — Mr. Johnson, I beg you to believe me — Gregory Ballaston was under the influence of that horrible Image. All the time he behaved quite strangely. As soon as he had parted from it, he was as different as possible. If whoever killed my uncle came from the house where that Image is — it's a terrible thing to say, but I honestly believe it — they couldn't help it, they weren't responsible."

The tenant of the Great House shook his head.

"It is too late," he said.

"What do you mean, too late?" she demanded, with a sudden fear in her eyes. "What have you done? What right have you to interfere, anyway? Gregory Ballaston is going abroad to-night. That is the best thing that could happen."

"It is nevertheless too late," Mr. Johnson declared. "The local police have consulted with Scotland Yard by telephone, and they have decided that the evidence they hold at present against Gregory Ballaston is sufficient for them to stop his going abroad. They have issued two warrants to-night. He will be arrested, I should say, within the next few minutes."

She seemed suddenly to tower above him; white, passionate, menacing. Her eyes blazed, her fingers seemed to seek a weapon. It was the first vital fury of youth.

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"You brute!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Gregory!"

For a moment the earth seemed to darken around her. Mr. Johnson groaned as he led the half-fainting girl to a couch.

"Miss Endacott," he said, "this is a terrible business, but believe me, justice must be done. Murder is an unforgivable crime. To take another man's life — have you thought what it means?"

"What about my life?" she moaned. "Don't you understand? I was content never to see him again. I lied about the Image to save him, but I love him. If this horrible thing happens, I think that I shall kill you. I shall either do that or die myself. I can't bear it, I tell you! I can't bear it!"

She leaned forward in her chair and began to sob. Mr. Johnson mopped his forehead feverishly. It was perhaps in his eager desire to escape from the horror of the moment that he took particular note of the long key which was attached to the chain which hung around her neck, and which had temporarily escaped its resting place.

"What key is that?" he asked her sharply.

She took no notice at first. He repeated his question. She looked as though she could have struck him.

"Key!" she echoed scornfully. "What does it matter? Why do you ask me about keys at a moment like this? There's only one thing that matters — he must be saved. You must do something. Take back something you have said. Of course, I know he did it, or I should be with him at this moment. He's not bad. He mustn't be killed. I — oh, my God!"

She began to sob again. He laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Listen," he said, "I will do all that I can, I promise

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you, but you must tell me what this key is. I have a reason for asking."

"It came from some safe-makers about eleven months ago," she answered wearily. "They said it was the duplicate which my uncle had ordered the last time he was in London."

He removed the chain from her neck, crossed the room and entered the little annex, the door of which, since the burglary, had stood open, and where, in a corner, a rusty old safe had been fitted into the wall. At the first turn the key slipped in and the lock yielded. He swung the door open. In the darkness there was the gleam of a bulky white envelope. He took it out. It was addressed to Claire Endacott. He examined it for a moment. Then he closed the safe and returned to the library.

"Miss Endacott," he announced, "that key of yours has solved something which has puzzled me for a very long time. It has opened the old safe here. The other key to it was inside. This letter, as you see, is for you. I have always felt convinced that your uncle, before his death, had succeeded in making some sort of a translation of the document which he possessed, indicating the whereabouts of the jewels. This is probably the solution."

She flung the letter away and, but for his intervention, would have trampled it with her foot upon the floor.

"Do something!" she begged. "You must stop what is going to happen. It isn't fair. It isn't right!"

He rescued the letter and himself broke the seal. She snatched it from his fingers.

"Don't waste time," she pleaded. "Do something! Letters! What does it matter about letters?"

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"It is from your uncle," he told her solemnly. "Probably the last thing he ever wrote."

She tore open the envelope with quick, nervous fingers, anxious yet reluctant. She began to read with a sort of sullen indifference. Then she seemed suddenly galvanised into a new and amazingly altered state of living. Mr. Johnson, as he watched her, was terrified. She sprang to her feet and shrieked out at the top of her voice.

"Read it! Read it yourself!" she cried, gripping him by the arm, so that her fingers bored their way into his flesh. "Read it and tell me that it is the truth! Let me see too. Spell it out! Read it!"

Their heads touched. Her breath came hot upon his cheek. She grasped the letter as though afraid it might be torn from her.

The Great House,
Saturday night.

MY DEAR CLAIRE,

I went to London this morning with the shadow of a fear — no more. I come back — doomed. You can hear all about it, if you like, from Sir Francis Moore, 18 Harley Street. Three months to live and much suffering! I think not. I shall end it to-night. You will be rich — much richer than you think. Malcolm's have my will. You and your aunt will share alike. I enclose in this letter a translation of a document which will tell you, unless the document lies, how to obtain the treasure in the Images. Use it as you will. I have no interest. I should have liked a year or two here, but I prefer what is to come to an increase of the agony of which I have already had a foretaste. I hope that you will be happy.

RALPH ENDACOTT.

He read it through word by word. She repeated

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them after him. Then a calm seemed to come upon her which was almost unnatural.

"Take care of the letter," he enjoined. "Don't lose it."

He rushed out across the lawn and through the postern gate. Down the great avenue from the house he could see the lights of two cars flashing. He ran on to the crossroads and stood there with arms extended. Presently they swung round the corner, and at the sight of him were brought to a standstill with a grinding of the brakes. In the front one were Major Holmes, Sir Bertram and Gregory, in the rear one Cloutson and Henry Ballaston. Mr. Johnson gripped Major Holmes by the arm.

"Major," he exclaimed, "an amazing thing has happened. You must come round to the Great House at once."

Major Holmes frowned.

"I am afraid, Mr. Johnson," he said, "it is too late for any sort of intervention. The criminal has confessed."

Mr. Johnson was staggered, but still frantically eloquent.

"There can be nothing to confess," he insisted. "Come and I'll show you the letter. I'll show you where I found it. You must come. You're in charge of this case. I'm sane. It was I who wanted justice done. You must see what has happened — see the open safe — read the letter!"

Major Holmes descended and gave an order to the sergeant behind. Both cars were driven to the Great House. Almost pushed in by Mr. Johnson, they crowded into the library. He pointed to the open safe, visible through the door of the annex.

"Miss Endacott had the key," he explained. "I

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noticed it round her neck to-night. It came a month after Mr. Endacott's death. I opened the safe and found this letter that you must all read. I will swear that it is in Ralph Endacott's handwriting. His niece will swear it. I took it from the safe. Ralph Endacott shot himself. He was dying."

"He shot himself!" Gregory gasped.

"There isn't a doubt about it," Mr. Johnson declared. "The name of the doctor is there. He was a dying man."

Across the room their eyes met — Gregory's and Claire's. It seemed as though nothing could keep them apart. Without conscious movement he was by her side, her hands in his. All the time, with slow, deliberate emphasis, Major Holmes was reading the letter aloud, reading the words penned by a dying man, the supreme yet ghastly irony of which no one properly apprehended in those few minutes of immense relief.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Claire faltered, as soon as she could find words.

Gregory glanced behind at the little group and drew her nearer and nearer. A nightmare was passing from his brain.

"I thought it was Dad," he whispered, under his breath. "What could I do?"

"The letter appears to be genuine," Major Holmes decided, looking up with an air of great relief, "and the name of the doctor fortunately provides us with corroborative evidence, but under the circumstances I must confess that I fail to understand Mr. Henry Ballaston's position," he added, turning towards him.

The latter coughed a little nervously.

"It has never been my custom," he declared, "to countenance any deviation from the truth in others or to indulge in anything approaching a falsehood my-

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self. I have to admit, however, that on the present occasion I made a false statement, which I beg leave to withdraw. The fact is," he confided, with a touch of that ingenuousness which was one of his characteristics, "I never doubted for a moment that my nephew Gregory, in the interests of the family, was guilty of this misdemeanour. I am a useless person in this world. He is a young man and our direct heir. I did what I thought best."

"But the Image?" Sir Bertram demanded in bewilderment — "the second Image of the Soul? How on earth did that get to the Hall?"

"I brought it," was Henry's complacent reply.

"But when?" Gregory asked helplessly.

"On the night of Mr. Endacott's unfortunate decease," Henry replied. "I must confess that on the previous evening I paid a surreptitious visit here. I had no idea on that occasion of purloining the Image, but I was anxious to secure, if possible, a translation of any of the Chinese documents which Mr. Endacott was known to possess which might assist us towards the recovery of the jewels. I found Mr. Endacott, however, at work, and I was unfortunate enough to disturb him. During his brief absence in the garden I endeavoured to peruse his papers, but his unexpectedly prompt return forced me on that occasion to abandon the enterprise. On the following evening I saw Gregory leave the house ——"

"I came to see if you were still in the garden," Gregory interrupted, turning to Claire.

"Precisely," Henry acquiesced, "but I was not at that time aware of your — er — attachment, nor did I attribute any sentimental purpose to your nocturnal excursion. I followed you — and at the side gate here, after some considerable interval, I heard what I

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imagined to be a muffled revolver shot. I crept from my place of concealment and entered the library. Mr. Endacott was lying there, quite dead. I listened for a moment. I was perhaps unnerved. I imagined that I heard your retreating footsteps from the anteroom into the courtyard. I listened again. There was nothing to be heard. The Image was lying on the floor by Mr. Endacott's side. He had probably been examining it prior to his lamented action and the fall of his body had displaced it. I considered. I decided that your nerve, Gregory, had failed you, that having committed the preliminary — er — misdeed, you had hurried away without the Image. I accordingly picked it up and brought it home. I placed it by the side of the other in my room. It has been there ever since. I saw the shock which its presence caused you, my dear brother — you too, Gregory — but I did not think an explanation advisable."

Sir Bertram laid his hand upon his son's shoulder.

"My God, Gregory," he muttered, "I thought — I thought, of course, that it was you."

Gregory groaned.

"And I," he explained — "as I knew it wasn't I — thought it must be you."

"My God, these Ballastons!" Major Holmes exclaimed, with amazed fervour.

A wonderful half-hour! Sir Bertram had slipped away and was on his knees by Madame's couch. Mr. Johnson, whilst every one else was talking confusedly, hastened down to the cellar. Gregory led Claire out into the garden. In his hand was the paper she had passed over to him.

"The Images," he whispered; "let's go and find them."

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They drove in the limousine car, still laden with his luggage, through the scented darkness, back to the Hall, his arms around her, her head resting contentedly upon his shoulder. Whilst she waited, he ran upstairs, to the amazement of Rawson and the footman who had admitted him, and presently returned with the two Images. Rawson met him at the foot of the stairs. His face was full of astonishment and piteous appeal.

"You will excuse me, Mr. Gregory, sir," he begged. "If there's any news ——"

Gregory staggered past him, borne down by his burden.

"Everything's all right, Rawson," he exclaimed. "Mr. Endacott shot himself — found out he was going to die, anyway. We shall be back, all three of us, to sleep. I may not be going abroad at all. Get yourself a bottle of wine, Rawson. Tell you more about it when we get back."

Another drive which seemed to pass like a dream; a dream during which the agony of the last hour appeared to fade into nothingness. Then the Great House again, the Images upon the library table, and a little crowd gathered around. Mr. Johnson, to whom Gregory had passed the paper, called out the instructions.

"You press the right eye of the Body," he directed, "and press at the same time the inner lobe of the left ear. Then you move the Image forward three times slowly, pressing most at the lowest point. Now then!"

Gregory obeyed the instructions. At the end of the third movement there was a slight noise inside like the whirring of a spring. A ticking began. They stood a little distance away. Suddenly the right eye opened and a stream of what seemed to be red and crystal and green fire came out and discharged itself upon the

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tablecloth. Every one drew closer, fascinated, breathless, until with a final whirring the shower ended. Mr. Johnson passed his hands over the stones.

"The finest emeralds I ever saw," he declared. "There is one diamond there I wouldn't dare to value. — Now for the Soul! You reverse the process. Press the left eye and the lobe of the right ear."

This time, after the whirring ended, the left eye opened, and a slow stream of pink and white pearls fell on to the table.

"The tears of Buddha," Mr. Johnson exclaimed. "It's the oldest superstition on the river. 'When Buddha weeps, the tears are pearls.'"

Again they watched, spellbound. This stream continued even longer than the other one. Then there was a little click and all was over. The eye slipped back. The Image seemed to smile in beneficent fashion. Claire's fingers tightened upon Gregory's arm.

"Without expert advice," Mr. Johnson pronounced, in an awed tone, "I wouldn't take less than a million for them."

"They belong to you, every stone," Gregory whispered to his companion.

She laughed up at him.

"Does it matter?" she murmured.

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CHAPTER XV

Once more five men, from a safe distance behind the muslin curtains, watched the approach towards the village inn of the tenant of the Great House. This time, however, conditions were different. The strip of road lay clean and hard in the grip of a four days' frost. There were little pools of ice near the pavement, the trees, leafless and stark, stood motionless against the clear sky. Although it was early in the afternoon the sun was already sinking beneath a bank of ominous-looking clouds. Mr. Johnson, in thick tweeds and leggings, with a powdering of snow upon his coat, carrying a gun over one shoulder and a cartridge bag suspended from the other, made his appearance coming along the lane from the Hall.

"He do be a changed man, that, for sure," Mr. Pank observed.

"And for that matter," Mr. Craske put in, "his wife be a changed woman. I mind when she used to come in for groceries for Madame, always looking a little tired, almost sulky-like, as though there were nothing in life worth caring about. Now, I do call her one of the best-looking women in these parts. It's worth going a mile to see her and Mrs. Gregory together, either on horseback or out with the beagles."

"They say," the innkeeper began ——

"Hush!" Rawson interrupted. "I believe he's coming in."

Mr. Johnson had hesitated at the corner and glanced at his watch. Instead of taking the turn to the Great House he swung towards the inn, and, pausing for a moment outside to look down the breech of his gun,

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entered with a cheery greeting. Rawson at once stood up. The newcomer good-humouredly waved him back to his seat.

"Don't let me disturb any one," he begged, finding a convenient corner for his gun and relapsing into the easy-chair which had been discreetly vacated by Mr. Craske. "I'll take a warming drink, if you please, Mr. Pank. A wineglassful of sloe gin, if you have it, and if any of you gentlemen will join me, I shall be proud. I forgot my flask this morning."

"You've been out along with Mr. Gregory, sir?" Rawson enquired.

"We've been after snipe on the mere side. Good sport, but chilly. I've shot snipe in China before now, but they don't seem in such a hurry as these Norfolk devils. Mr. Gregory wiped my eyes more than once."

"Mr. Gregory's a fine shot at what I may call the irregular birds," the butler ventured, "snipe and woodcock and suchlike. You'll pardon me saying so though, sir, I'd rather see you at the pheasants. I've noticed the last twice that the Squire's put you at the awkward corners."

"Well, well," Mr. Johnson admitted, "it's a great life, this, if I could only learn to stick on a horse. Mr. Foulds, you'll have to keep your eye open for another one up to my weight. I had to miss a day's hunting last week."

"I'll do that with pleasure, sir," the veterinary promised. "There's a sale at Norwich next week. I'll be over yonder surely."

Mr. Johnson drank his sloe gin and held out the glass for replenishment.

"Good warming stuff," he pronounced. "By-the-by, you may all like to know that I heard from the Squire

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this morning. They found the villa at Cannes in great shape, and her ladyship has walked a mile every day since they've been there."

"It do seem wonderful!" the innkeeper declared.

"A most amazing recovery," Mr. Craske echoed. "To see her lying on that chair month after month, no one would ever dream that she'd end her days marrying and walking about like any one else. There's been a-many changes in these parts, Mr. Johnson, sir, since you've come."

The latter nodded his head thoughtfully.

"There have indeed," he agreed.

"One did feel six months ago," the grocer continued, "as though some sort of cloud were hanging over the village, what with the poor gentleman as we thought had been murdered, and the police acting so suspicious-like round the place, and all the time talk about the Hall and the Ballaston lands coming under the hammer, and you, Mr. Johnson, not half the cheerful gentleman you are now, looking so solemn as though you had something on your mind all the time, if one might make so free."

"Things have changed certainly," Mr. Johnson acquiesced, knocking out the ashes from his pipe and relighting it, preparatory to departure. "The Ballaston mortgages, for instance, as every one knows, have been paid up to the last farthing, and enough left over from Mr. Gregory's little enterprise to keep every one in comfort for the rest of their lives. No talk nowadays either of having to sell the old pictures or bits of china that weren't heirlooms. There's Mr. Henry up at Christie's once a month looking for missing pieces. He's starting a new catalogue the first of the year."

"And the poor gentleman, as was supposed to have been murdered, found to have shot himself!" Mr. Foulds

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remarked. "That sort of lifted a weight from the place."

Mr. Johnson took up his gun.

"Well," he said, "we certainly seem in smooth water now. I am afraid I was rather an unpopular resident at one time."

"Mr. Craske was the only one on us," the innkeeper rejoined with a grin, "as had any complaint. He did say, when you came, as he was hoping for a family man."

The tenant of the Great House turned and faced the little company. There was a twinkle in his eyes and a gleam of mutual understanding passed between them.

"Well," he exclaimed good-humouredly, "this is no sort of a place for keeping secrets. You'll have another health to drink before long, I hope. Good afternoon, every one."

He took his leave, and they watched him from behind the muslin blinds as he walked briskly up the lane and entered his domain by the postern gate.

"That do seem to me to be a proper sort of man," the innkeeper declared emphatically.

THE END

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